

Ukikumo Shinrei Kitan



English translation by Laute, Laute! <http://laute.tumblr.com/>

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Chapter 1. THE WAY OF THE RED EYE

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prologue

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The moon was out –

The red-tinged moon was suspended in the sky.

Osayo was hurrying home. She had no lantern. The light of the moon was her only guide.

Because of the heavy rain a few days before, the ground was muddy and difficult to traverse.

She had not thought she would be returning home so late. Though she had only been going to deliver textiles to a customer in Kojimachi, there had been a huge couple's fight at her destination.

Though Osayo could have just ignored it – not even a dog would have taken a bite out of this – her nature wouldn't allow her to.

By the time she forced each side share their side of the story and managed to make them make up, the sun had already set.

Her younger brother, Yasohachi, would probably jokingly say something like 'If you have the time to bother with other people's troubles, worry about your own marriage prospects', but Yasohachi, who had a personality that attracted trouble, had no right to say anything about Osayo.

– I must hurry home though.

Because black ships[1] had come to Uruga, there was some commotion, about expelling foreigners from the country and whatnot.

Osayo walked on the road by the Tamagawa Aqueduct and reached Yotsuya Ookido. Then, she suddenly stopped.

She had heard someone's voice in the night wind.

She strained her ears to hear.

She could hear it clearly –

A woman's weeping.

She looked around and spotted an old row house[2]. The building seemed to have been abandoned for a long time, as it had started to rot.

The voice seemed to come from inside. The room farthest in.

'Hello!'

Osayo called out as she walked inside.

The door was off.

'Is something the matter?'

Osayo stuck her head in and looked around.

There was someone in the dark.

A woman –

The woman wearing a white underdress had her back to Osayo and was curled up, shivering, in a corner of the room. Her long hair was disorderly.

– Perhaps her husband was rough with her.

'What's wrong? Is something the matter?' asked Osayo, entering the dirt-floored area. The woman stopped crying, but no reply came.

'Hello?' said Osayo once more. Then, for a moment, the woman disappeared from in front of Osayo's eyes –

But then she stood in the opposite corner. Her back was still to Osayo.

'Not here – '

Osayo was about to speak once more when the woman suddenly spoke.

'Eh?'

'Not here either – '

'What is not here?'

'Where?'

The woman's voice was strong, to the point that you wouldn't think she was the same woman who had been crying so feebly before.

Osayo felt a chill run down her spine.

'Excuse me...'

'Where!?' shrieked the woman as she turned around.

The woman's bloodshot eyes shot through Osayo. Osayo wanted to run away from that unnatural expression, but she was arrested by that sinister gaze and could not move.

'Not here – '

The woman put her hands on her own belly.

Then, a red liquid started pouring out from there, dyeing the underdress and the woman's hands.

It was – blood.

The woman thrust her bloody hands straight towards Osayo.

'Where did – it go – '

Something slimy touched Osayo's cheek.

Not even capable of shrieking, Osayo fainted right there –

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'Is this really the place?' murmured Yasohachi to himself.

It was hot enough to boil. The sun's rays were like stabs – standing was enough to make sweat start to trickle.

The cry of the cicadas was almost noisy in his ears.

He was in front of an old shrine –

It was under Tokugawa patronage. It looked incredibly deserted in comparison to the surrounding shrines and temples which were at the height of prosperity.

The torii[3] had probably been painted vermillion at one point, but it was faded now, and weeds grew lush on the premises. In front, there was just a lopsided shrine.

Grass had grown all the way up to the roof.

– Well, there isn't any point thinking about that here.

Yasohachi passed through the torii and stepped into the shrine. His eyes turned towards the mossy guardian lion-dog[4]. It felt like he was being glared at.

– This place feels rather unsettling.

He looked around once more upon reaching the shrine.

There should have been a place for the monk to stay, but there did not seem to be any building like that around him.

Yasohachi had a reason for coming to this shrine.

His older sister, Osayo, had met something a few days earlier – a ghost, or perhaps a spirit. Ever since then, she had been acting strangely.

Their father, Genta, noticed the possession – in a panic, he had gone to the shrine which they were on good terms with to consult for an exorcism, but Osayo did not seem to be recovering.

While they were worrying about what to do, a passing medicine seller recommended this shrine, saying 'If that's the case, there's an exorcist –'

'Hello,' Yasohachi said towards the shrine.

There was no response.

'Is anybody here?'

This time, he raised his voice, but there was still no response.

– There's no helping it. I might need to give up.

Just as Yasohachi had turned around and was about to return on the same path he had taken earlier, there was a voice.

'What do you want?'

A low voice that carried well.

Yasohachi stopped walking and hurriedly looked around. However, he didn't see anyone.

'Where are you looking? Here. Here –'

Yasohachi's eyes went toward the voice and saw the shrine.

Though Yasohachi was nervous, he started to walk towards the shrine.

He climbed the rotting wooden steps and put his face close to the lattice door of the shrine to try to peer in, and then bam! The door opened from the inside.

'Ahh!'

Yasohachi leant back in shock and lost his footing on the steps.

He hurriedly reached out but grabbed only empty air. He slipped down the stairs on his behind.

'Ow...'

Yasohachi looked up, his face twisted in pain.

A man was standing at the open door.

An eccentric man –

He was wearing a completely white kimono. The obi[5] was not tied but just hung loosely. Much of his chest was revealed as well.

He did not have his hair in a bun either, so his head was unkempt. His skin was pale enough that it could contest his kimono in whiteness. With a slender build, he looked like he had leapt out of a ghost painting by Maruyama Okyo[6].

Furthermore, what stood out the most was the red cloth that was wrapped around his head so that his two eyes were covered.

He couldn't see anything like that – no, perhaps he was blind.

What was even odder was that eyes were drawn on that red cloth in black ink.

'You're loud. What do you want?'

The man thrust the staff he was holding in front of Yasohachi's eyes.

The eyes drawn on the cloth around the man's head were looking down at Yasohachi. There was a pressure coming from them that was hard to describe.

'Ah, a-actually... I came because I heard about this place from Hijikata of Ishida Sanyaku[7].'

'Ishida Sanyaku? Ah, that baragaki[8]...'

'I heard that there was an exorcist here – '

'That idiot Toshizou. He's done something unnecessary.'

The man looked pained as he put a hand to his chin.

From that response, it seemed that this man was the exorcist that Yasohachi was looking for.

Now that he looked at the man again, the face that he had thought looked eccentric now seemed to let out power. It was mysterious.

Yasohachi stood up and fixed his posture before bowing at the waist and lowering his head.

'Please save me older sister somehow.'

'Like I care.'

An immediate response.

Yasohachi had heard from Hijikata that the man certainly was skilled, but he was obstinate. However, he hadn't thought it would be to such an extent. Regardless, Yasohachi could not back down here.

Osayo could die.

'Please don't say that. I truly need your help.'

Yasohachi bowed his head once more.

'You don't understand, do you?'

'Yes?'

'I'm saying that bowing your head won't get you anything.'

The man put his staff on his shoulder and sat down on the steps. Then, he put his hand out towards Yasohachi.

– Ah, so that's what he wants.

'Of course, I will pay an appropriate amount.'

'Fifty ryo[9].'

'Eh? That much?'

'Do you have a complaint?'

The man frowned.

'No, that's not... But fifty ryo is just...'

'If you can't pay, go home.'

It didn't seem like the man would budge a whit. Without showing any hesitation, the man stood up, turned around and started to return to the shrine.

'P-please wait.'

Fifty ryo was a lot, but it was worth nothing in comparison to Osayo's life.

'Do you feel like paying now?'

'Yes.'

'Then give it over.'

The man held out his hand.

Yasohachi gave his wallet with everything in it to the man. The man immediately spread open the wallet and counted the money with his fingers.

The moment he finished counting all of it, the man turned towards Yasohachi. The two eyes drawn on the red cloth seemed to be glaring at him.

'This isn't enough at all. Are you trying to take advantage of me because you think I'm blind?'

The man grabbed Yasohachi by the collar and pulled him up.

The force of it made Yasohachi gulp.

'T-this is the advance payment. Once you've rid my sister of the spirit, I'll pay the rest.'

'Shut up. Get lost already.'

'But my sister...'

'Like I said, I don't care,' the man said expressionlessly. He put the money back in the wallet and threw it to the ground.

'Excuse me...'

'What? You're still here? If you stick around, I'll leave,' said the man. He pushed Yasohachi aside and started to walk out of the shrine.

'Please wait.'

Yasohachi ran after him. The man turned around.

'You say you want to save your sister, but you won't pay up. If she dies, it'll be your fault.'

As the man said that, his lips turned up into a smile.

– My fault.

Yasohachi was at a loss for words after hearing something so unexpected.

'Honestly. I can't deal with this without some sake.'

The man went through the shrine's torii with his staff in hand and left.

For a while, Yasohachi stood, stunned, as the sun set on the shrine.

He had completely offended the man. He had to do something – as Yasohachi was thinking, he picked up his wallet.

'Eh?'

He felt something was strange so he took out his wallet again and looked inside.

'What is this?'

Inside the wallet, instead of money, there were small stones.

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'I'm at a loss...' said Yasohachi with a sigh.

He had come to request the services of the exorcist. He hadn't even thought that he would end up being tricked out of his money.

He couldn't return home in shame like this.

That man's odd appearance and that confident way of speaking – he had to have a considerable amount of skill.

Yasohachi would overlook the man's personality and slight suspiciousness. Right now, he had to save Osayo no matter what.

However, he had no idea where the man had gone. If he waited here, the man would probably return eventually – no, that man had stolen his money. He wouldn't come back so easily.

Yasohachi would have to search for him.

That man had muttered about not being able to deal with this without alcohol. Perhaps he had taken the stolen money to some bar.

Near here, it would probably be Shiraiya or Marukuma.

Though Yasohachi wasn't certain, it was better than staying here. He started walking towards Marukuma first.

– If she dies, it'll be your fault.

As Yasohachi walked, that man's words came back to him.

Yasohachi didn't know his mother's face. He had been told that she had died of an illness when he was young. Genta, his father, was busy managing the dry-goods shop and virtually never interacted with him. However, he had not felt lonely.

He had had Osayo.

She was nineteen, so three years older than Yasohachi. She was reliable and had looked after Yasohachi even since they were young.

When Yasohachi was being bullied by the local children, Osayo had helped him, and when he had been sick, she had been the one who nursed him back to health.

About one month ago, she had had a big fight with their father, Genta.

The cause was Yasohachi's saying that he wanted to become a painter. He had not just said it without thinking. When he became ten, because of a painting he had seen, he had started drawing himself.

Since he was the eldest son, he had to take over the shop – he had felt that way, but with time, he had become unable to repress the desire to become a painter, so he honestly confessed his feelings.

When Genta heard that, he had been furious. 'A painter is the one thing you won't become!' Genta was normally genial – Yasohachi had never seen him let his emotions explode like that before.

Genta had even talked about disowning Yasohachi, but Osayo had soothed him. Yasohachi hadn't spoken properly with Genta since then, but thanks to Osayo, he could still live in the same house.

Osayo wasn't just Yasohachi's older sister – she was also his mother. He couldn't imagine losing her –

While Yasohachi was thinking, he reached Marukuma.

The sun had already set.

A faint light and cheerful voices came through the oil-treated sliding door with Marukuma written on it.

'Good evening.'

Yasohachi went under the sign curtain and opened the sliding door.

'Oh, if it isn't Hachi.'

Kumakichi, the owner of the bar, was carrying sake when he noticed Yasohachi and called out to him.

Perhaps because of the dojo he attended in the day, he had a very firm body.

On top of that, he had a fierce look to him with a beard, so he looked just like a bear[10].

However, in contrast to Kumakichi's looks, he was good at taking care of others – a man kind to his core. He had played with Yasohachi a lot when he was young.

'Kuma-san, it's been a while.'

'How's Osayo-chan?' asked Kumakichi, sticking out his sharp chin.

'Ah, no, she's... not in a very good state...'

'I see... Then don't come to a place like this – get home already!'

Kumakichi hit Yasohachi on the shoulder.

'No, that's not what I'm here for, Kuma-san. Actually, I'm looking for an exorcist.'

'An exorcist?'

'Yes. He wears a white kimono and has a red cloth wrapped around his eyes... Has he come here?'

'Came just earlier.'

'Eh?'

The answer came so readily that Yasohachi was surprised.

'Really?'

'Yeah. Said he wanted to be alone so I sent him to the second floor.'

Yasohachi took the stairs while Kumakichi was still talking. He opened the sliding door forcefully.

'Ah!'

– He was there.

The man with a red cloth over his eyes whom he had been searching for.

He had his back to the wall, one knee up. He took a gulp from his sake cup before slowly turning his head towards Yasohachi.

The eyes drawn on the red cloth froze Yasohachi.

'How noisy. Who's there?'

The man was not surprised or confused. He spoke calmly.

'My name is Yasohachi. We met at the shrine earlier.'

'Ah, you're that brat. How'd you know I was here?'

'You had said you needed to drink alcohol, so I thought you would be at some bar.'

'I see. I guess you can put that head on your shoulders to some use.'

Being praised by this man didn't please Yasohachi at all. More importantly –

'Expel the spirit for me.'

Yasohachi walked up to the man.

'I said I refused.'

The man took another sip from his cup.

'You took an advance payment, so you will do your work properly.'

'Advance payment?'

Yasohachi threw his wallet full of small rocks at the man. It hit his neck and then fell to the tatami.

'There are only rocks inside. You switched the money out for them.'

'You have no proof, right? Are you an idiot?'

The corners of the man's lips turned up in a smile.

Not only had the man talked back to him, he had called him an idiot – his character was truly warped.

'In any case, you will expel the spirit from my sister for me.'

'Don't make such a fuss,' said the man, picking up the wallet and tossing it carelessly back at Yasohachi.

After Yasohachi reached out to catch the wallet, he glared at the man. Though the blind man probably didn't care, Yasohachi couldn't help himself.

'Of course I am making a fuss. My older sister's life depends on it.'

'I'll listen to what you've got to say. Drink – '

The man poured sake into a sake cup and held it out towards Yasohachi.

Was the man planning on making Yasohachi drunk so he would lose his composure? Like Yasohachi would fall for that.

'Will you expel the spirit from my older sister or not – please give me a response,' demanded Yasohachi.

'No – if that's my response, what will you do?' asked the man challengingly.

'I'll search for somebody else.'

'How about the money?'

'It doesn't matter. You don't plan on returning it anyway, right?'

'You're the son of a big shop, right?'

'That doesn't matter right now.'

'Bull's eye? From the opinion of a rich kid like you, that's just loose change.'

The man's words irritated Yasohachi.

It was true that Yasohachi's family's old dry-goods shop made money. They had never been troubled for food, but that didn't mean they used money excessively.

Ever since Yasohachi was young, his father, Genta, had always told him to use money sparingly.

'Money is important. However, my sister is more important. That's all.'

After Yasohachi said that, the man let out a high laugh.

'You're an interesting man. Fine. I'll keep you company for a while.'

'Like I said, I don't have the time to accompany your alcoholic banquet. If you aren't going to save my sister...'

'I'm saying I'll expel whatever's possessing your sister.'

The man stood up.

Now that Yasohachi looked at him from the front like this, the man was rather tall. Yasohachi had to look up at his face.

'What did you say just now?'

'I said I'll expel the spirit possessing your sister.'

'You can do it?'

'You're asking that now? You came all this way because you think I can, right?'

That was true – but it was also true that Yasohachi had doubts.

Would a thieving man that Yasohachi knew nothing about be able to do something that a monk from an esteemed temple hadn't?

Yasohachi had begun to feel anxious.

'But how...'

'I see too much, you see.'

'See too much?'

The line didn't match up with a blind man.

'Well, it doesn't matter. Stop talking and show me to where your sister is.'

'Y-yes.'

Under the man's pressure, Yasohachi tried to head out immediately. However, the man called out to him before he could.

'Before that, cheer up a bit. Drink.'

As the man said that, he thrust a sake cup in front of Yasohachi's eyes. It would be troublesome if the man's mood soured because Yasohachi refused.

Yasohachi drank the sake in the cup in one gulp.

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'Oh. The house is rather nice.'

After Yasohachi showed the man to his house, the man put his chin in his hands and said that admiringly.

Just as the man said, Yasohachi's house, a dry-goods shop from the beginning of the Edo period, was rather large. However –

'Can you tell?'

'I can. There are things I can see even with these eyes.'

The man put his hand to the red cloth covering his eyes.

What on earth did that mean – Yasohachi was about to ask, but then there was a loud sound from inside the house, as if something had fallen.

– Did something happen?

Yasohachi ran inside.

'Eh?'

It was strange –

Even though Kanichi, the servant, would normally have been there, Yasohachi couldn't see him. There was a strange atmosphere that Yasohachi couldn't describe.

– I have a bad feeling.

Yasohachi gulped.

Then – there was a scream from further in.

Yasohachi started running before any thoughts came to his head.

Something might have happened to Osayo. As Yasohachi ran down the corridor, another scream reached his ears.

At the same time, a sliding door broke and a person fell in front of him.

Yasohachi stopped in shock.

It was Kanichi –

'P-please help...'

Kanichi clung to Yasohachi. Kanichi's arms were cut. He was bleeding.

'What happened?'

Before Kanichi could answer, a woman came out from the tatami room.

– Osayo.

Her long hair was disheveled and her shoulders were heaving. Huff, huff – her breathing was ragged.

There was a short knife with blood dripping off it in her hand.

'Aah!'

Kanichi let out a scream and ran off.

Yasohachi didn't move.

No, to put it correctly, he couldn't move.

He knew that the person in front of him was Osayo, his sister. However, he still felt afraid.

'Where – '

Osayo spoke in a hoarse voice.

'Sister.'

Yasohachi called out to her, but she didn't seem to hear him.

Osayo glared at Yashoachi with bloodshot eyes, like those of a starving beast.

A sound like wind came from her throat.

'Where!?' Osayo shrieked shrilly, waving the knife above her head.

The tip of the blade glittered.

– I need to run.

Contrary to his will, his body was frozen and would not move. It was as if he had been bound by an evil spirit.

The knife came down in front of him.

– I'm going to be killed!

Yasohachi shut his eyes tightly. At the same time, something thrust him away and he fell to the floor.

– What happened?

When he lifted his head, he saw that man grappling with Osayo, who was still waving about the knife. It seemed like that man had saved him.

The man lightly kicked Osayo in the stomach.

Osayo staggered backwards, but she soon regained her balance.

'No helping it. I'll go all out,' said the man with a click of his tongue. Then, he grabbed the cloth over his eyes and pulled it down.

– Just as I thought!

The man wasn't blind. He could see.

Osayo jumped up and came towards the man. However, she collapsed partway and stopped moving.

Yasohachi had no idea what had happened.

When he came back to his senses, he ran up to Osayo, who was on the floor.

'Sister!'

'Don't worry. She's just fainted,' the man said.

Yasohachi confirmed himself that she was breathing.

'You saved me...'

Yasohachi sighed in relief.

'This is part of my work too,' said the man casually, but it wasn't something that just anybody could do.

Kanichi had run off with a scream, and Yasohachi hadn't even been able to move. The man had been able to respond calmly to such a situation, so perhaps he really was an exorcist, just as Hijikata had said.

Furthermore –

'Ah...'

The sound came out of Yasohachi's voice unconsciously when he looked up and saw the man's face.

Just as he had expected, the man's eyes, now that the red cloth was off them, were open. That wasn't all – they were dyed a deep red, as if they were burning.

'You saw...' the man said, sounding pained. He hurriedly tried to cover them.

'Why do you hide them?' asked Yasohachi, which made the man's mouth twist into a frown.

'Don't ask stupid questions. It's obviously because people think they're disturbing and are frightened.'

'Is that really the reason?'

'What?'

'I mean, I've never seen such beautiful eyes before. There's no reason to be frightened.'

When Yasohachi said that, the man's red eyes shook just slightly.

Then, the man let out a snort and sneered as he covered them with the cloth again.

'The world isn't made up of idiots like you.'

'Is that how it is?'

'People despise those who are different from them.'

'I don't think that's true.'

'You're naïve. I wouldn't hide my eyes otherwise.'

The man's voice sounded terribly sad.

Yasohachi wanted to deny it, but no words came out. It was true that, like the man said, some people despised those who were different from them.

Yasohachi thought about saying something consoling, but he stopped. That was definitely not what the man wanted.

'I was born with these eyes – '

The man put a hand on the red cloth covering his eyes.

'Born with?'

'Yes. I don't know why. Maybe it was in my bloodline, but I had no way to check, since I've never met my parents,' said the man with a laugh.

However, there was no happiness in it. If Yasohachi had to say, it was an oppressive loneliness –

The man must have suffered in ways that Yasohachi couldn't even imagine.

'I don't know if it's because of the colour of my eyes, but I can see them.'

– See them?

'What can you see?'

'The spirits of the dead. That is – ghosts.'

The man smiled faintly.

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'Please keep this a secret from the master – '

Kanichi had his grizzled head bowed deeply as he sat in front of Yasuhachi. The thin and small-framed man in his fifties looked even smaller than he usually did.

It seemed like Kanichi had been the cause of the incident.

Ever since Osayo had been possessed, she had been kept in the backroom with a pole propped against the door. Though none of them wanted to do it, there was no choice, since she would act violently otherwise.

Kanichi had taken the pole away to bring in food when Osayo burst out in a fit – and this was what had resulted.

Though Genta, Yasuhachi's father, was not the type to be overly strict with servants, with the situation like this, the blame might fall on Kanichi.

'It's fine. I will keep it a secret from my father,' Yasohachi said with a smile, at which point Kanichi finally relaxed.

Kanichi had started working at this shop about one year ago.

He had had a shop himself before then, but he hadn't been able to keep it afloat. He had been worrying about what to do next when Genta hired him.

Part of it was probably that Kanichi didn't want to cause trouble to somebody he was indebted to, but the desire to not be chased out was probably stronger.

Well, though it had been tough, everything was sorted out thanks to that man. Currently, Osayo was back in the backroom. Things would probably be fine if they just did something about the broken door.

Furthermore, Yasohachi didn't want to meet Genta himself right now. Though Osayo had helped them reconcile, the awkward atmosphere following the fight still continued.

'Thank you very much. I will clean up now, so – '

'Oi.'

The man covering his eyes with a cloth called out to Kanichi before he could leave.

The man was sitting with his back against the wall and his arms crossed. He had a difficult expression on his face.

'What is it?'

'The knife she had – where'd she get it?' the man asked.

'I do not know. Perhaps it was something that had been in the backroom.'

After hearing Kanichi's explanation, Yasohachi remembered something.

'If I remember correctly, there was a knife in a box in the backroom.'

'Then the same thing will happen again. Move it elsewhere.'

The man's words were absolutely correct. If Osayo took the knife out again, Yasohachi couldn't say what would happen.

'I will do it,' said Kanichi. Then, he left the room.

At the same time, the man stood up and walked towards the desk.

'Did you paint these?' he asked, pointing at the paintings piled up on top of the desk.

'I did,' replied Yasohachi.

The man pulled down the cloth covering his eyes and picked up the paintings to look at them.

Having somebody look at his paintings right in front of him was unexpectedly embarrassing. However, Yasohachi still wanted to know the man's opinion.

'What do you think?' he asked.

The man snorted.

'They're pretty good.'

Yasohachi's expression relaxed at the honest compliment, but that was just for a moment.

'But that's all – '

'What do you mean?'

'There's no power in these paintings.'

The man's words disappointed Yasohachi, but at the same time, he understood.

'So there really is no power in these?'

'There isn't. For example, this painting – '

The man picked up a painting of a woman in a red kimono. It was a painting of Osayo.

'It's painted very accurately. The colours aren't bad either. That's all though. Nothing comes out of it. It's like it's dead. No, dead people have something in them too. If you can't move someone's heart with a painting, then it's no different from a stamp.'

The man's words were awful, but Yasohachi had nothing to say in return.

Perhaps he had no talent for paintings –

Perhaps he should take over the shop instead of dreaming about painting.

'In contrast though, this painting's alive – '

The man dropped Yasohachi's paintings to the tatami and walked up to the painting on the wall.

In the painting, a woman was sitting on her knees as she looked at water lilies.

Yasohachi didn't know who had drawn it. He had taken it out from somewhere deep in the storehouse when he was young.

This painting had been the one that made Yasohachi want to paint.

He could remember clearly the impact he had received then. It had been like being struck by lightning.

This painting wasn't only beautiful. It felt like the emotions of the woman in the painting were being conveyed.

To borrow the man's words from earlier, the painting was alive.

'Your paintings really are rubbish,' the man said mercilessly.

'More importantly, how was it?' asked Yasohachi, to get back on topic since it hurt him to listen.

'How?'

The man cocked his head.

Yasohachi asked, 'Was my sister possessed by a ghost?'

That seemed to make the man finally recall what he was here for.

'Yeah, no doubt about it. She's possessed.'

The man sat cross-legged in front of Yasohachi and poured sake into a cup from a gourd flask. He drank it all at once.

'Then please expel the spirit from here as soon as possible,' requested Yasohachi, which made the man snort in laughter.

'You're acting like an idiot again. If I could expel it, I'd've done that already.'

'Er, but...'

– I'll expel the spirit.

That was what he said. That was why Yasohachi had brought the man all the way here.

'Putting up seals or reading sutras can't expel spirits.'

'Eh?'

Surprise spread through Yasohachi, along with doubt.

'My method is a bit different from other people's.'

'How is it different?'

Yasohachi leant forward. The man's scarlet eyes looked straight back at him.

They were so beautiful that Yasohachi couldn't help but let an 'Oh...' out.

'Don't react every single time, you idiot.'

'But beautiful things are beautiful – there's no helping it.'

'You really are a strange guy.'

The man drank another cup of sake.

He had drunk a considerable amount at Marukuma too. Despite drinking so much alcohol, this man's white skin wasn't even the slightest bit red.

'Then how is it different?'

'I said this earlier, but these eyes of mine can see ghosts.'

'Yes.'

'You don't doubt me?'

'I don't. It wouldn't be strange for such beautiful eyes to be able to do something like that – '

The man made a click with his tongue.

'Your logic makes no sense.'

'Is that so?'

Yasohachi didn't feel like he had said anything strange.

'Well, it doesn't matter. Anyway – all I can do is see. I can't do anything else. Buddha and the gods can all shove it.'

'So you can't expel spirits – '

'Don't rush to the conclusion like that, idiot.'

'I-I apologise...'

'Seeing means understanding what is there. Ghosts don't just wander to while away time. They stay in the world of the living because they have some sort of goal.'

'A – goal?'

'Yeah. A grudge or some regrets. A variety – '

'Is that how it is?'

'That's how it is. So I find the reason the ghost is wandering the world of the living and solve it.'

'I see.'

It felt very logical. Perhaps this was a more reliable method than seals and sutras.

'Then why is the ghost possessing my sister wandering this world?'

'That's the question. From what I saw earlier, the spirit seems to be looking for something.'

'What is that something?'

'I'm going to look for that now.'

The man poured more sake.

'Look for?'

'Exactly. First, I want to know where your sister encountered the ghost.'

'A dilapidated row house.'

Yasohachi had been worried about Osayo, who had left on an errand and hadn't returned. He had searched many places. Of course Yasohachi had, but people living nearby had also helped.

Dawn came and Kumakichi, the owner of Marukuma, had found Osayo collapsed in an abandoned row house and carried her back.

'Then we'll go there tomorrow. I'll wait at the shrine. Come first thing in the morning to show me there.'

The man rewrapped the red cloth and stood up to leave.

'Excuse me – '

Yasohachi called out to stop him.

'What?'

'I haven't heard your name yet.'

'My name?'

The man put a hand to his sharp chin.

'I live like a cloud at the mercy of the wind. I don't have a name.'

There was no way he didn't have a name.

Perhaps he disliked his name or he couldn't give it – in either case, Yasohachi felt like he couldn't press too far.

That said –

'It would be difficult for me not to have something to call you.'

'Then call me whatever you want.'

Being told that was in itself troublesome.

However, Yasohachi immediately thought of a name that fit the man perfectly.

'Then would "Ukikumo"[11] be acceptable?'

Earlier, the man had compared himself to a cloud at the mercy of the wind. If that was the case, calling him Ukikumo would be appropriate. It felt like it matched the man's appearance as well.

'Ukikumo, eh...'

'Yes.'

'Not bad.'

A faint smile appeared on the man's lips before he left –

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5

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The next day, Yasohachi went to the shrine.

The shrine where Ukikumo was –

The truth was he had planned on going earlier, but he had had to help at the shop and ended up going near noon.

'Good morning.'

Though he tried calling out towards the shrine, there was no response.

– Perhaps he left first.

Yasohachi went up the steps to the shrine and opened the lattice door. He didn't see Ukikumo there. However, the gourd and staff were there.

'Ukikumo-san!' called Yasohachi. Then –

'I can hear you.'

A voice came from somewhere. Ukikumo's voice.

Yasohachi went down the stairs and looked around frantically, but he couldn't see Ukikumo anywhere.

'Where are you?' he asked as he wandered the shrine's grounds.

Then – the thicket in front of him suddenly shook and a dark shadow stood up.

'Eek!'

Yasohachi was so shocked he leapt back with a shriek.

'Why are you so shocked?'

Ukikumo stood there, looking unimpressed.

Since nobody was there to look at him, he didn't have the red cloth on. His vivid scarlet eyes looked at Yasohachi.

They really were a beautiful colour. What pigments would need to be used to bring out such a colour –

'It's because you came out so suddenly.'

'You're the one who called me.'

'That's true, but... What were you doing there?'

'Obviously, I was taking a dump,' said Ukikumo, sounding satisfied as he started walking towards the shrine.

How is it obvious – Yasohachi was astonished, but he followed Ukikumo regardless.

'I was concerned that you had gone first.'

'You're still an idiot then,' said Ukikumo after returning to the shrine and sitting down, covering his eyes with his red cloth.

'Eh?'

'You haven't told me where the row house is. How could I go first?'

Now that he mentioned it, that was true.

'Then, let us depart,' said Yasohachi.

'Let's go,' agreed Ukikumo, standing up.

'Ukikumo-san, where are you from?' asked Yasohachi upon leaving the shrine and stepping forth on the road to the row house.

'What would you do if you knew?'

Though Ukikumo's eyes were hidden by the red cloth, the eyes drawn on the cloth seemed scornful.

'It isn't as if I would do anything. I just want to know.'

'Why do you want to know?'

'I think that it is important to know the path someone has walked in order to know somebody.'

'You're an idiot.'

'Why do you say so?'

'The place someone's born doesn't determine them. Knowing it won't tell you anything about a person.'

It was an incredibly conclusive way of speaking.

Ukikumo's reasoning made sense – though Yasohachi thought that, he still wanted to rebut.

'Is that how it is?'

'That's how it is. And I've never been in one place for longer than five years. I don't have any place I can say I'm "from",' Ukikumo murmured, turning his head up towards the sky.

A line of clouds drifted in the blue summer sky.

Though Yasohachi did not know what past Ukikumo had, when he looked at his profile, he thought that it must have been a terribly sad one.

After that, they continued walking in silence. Soon, they reached the abandoned row house.

'I hear that my sister collapsed in the room in the very back.'

Yasohachi stopped to point.

Without any hesitation, Ukikumo tried to go in.

'Please wait a moment.'

Yasohachi hurriedly pulled Ukikumo back by the arm.

'What?'

'Isn't it dangerous?'

'What?'

Ukikumo cocked his head.

'I mean, this is where my sister was possessed by a ghost...'

'That's why it's safe, you idiot.'

'Oh...'

It was just as Ukikumo said. The ghost that had been here was possessing Osayo now. That meant it was no longer here.

Yasohachi and Ukikumo went into the row house.

The whole building was on a slant, and the rooms were filled with dust. It felt like the building might collapse at any moment. It made the shrine that Ukikumo had made his stronghold look practically magnificent.

Ukikumo took the red cloth off and then stepped onto the rotten tatami. He slowly looked around.

– What is he doing?

'Mm, this is awful...'

After a while, Ukikumo looked grim.

'What is it?' asked Yasohachi.

Ukikumo let out a sigh.

'The ghost possessing your sister was probably killed here...'

'How can you tell?'

'Look here. Sword marks. Fairly old ones.'

Ukikumo pointed at the centre of a wooden pillar.

It was true that there was something that looked like a sword mark.

'And here – '

Next, Ukikumo pointed at a corner of the room.

The tatami and the wall had dark speckles on them.

'What is this?'

'Probably dried blood – ' Ukikumo said casually. It made a chill run down Yasohachi's spine.

'Does the ghost possessing my sister have a grudge against their killer? Are they searching for them?'

'Well, it would be appropriate to think that way.'

'So if we catch the person who killed the ghost, my sister will be saved.'

'You can think that way too.'

Though Yasohachi had just been wandering in the darkness until now, Ukikumo's words gave him a light of hope.

'But how should we search...'

'There's probably somebody who knows about the incident. Somebody who lived in this row house before, maybe.'

'I see.'

'Tell me when you find out.'

After saying that, Ukikumo covered his eyes with the red cloth and left the room.

Yasohachi hurriedly ran after him.

“‘Tell me when you find out’? Am I doing it myself?”

'Of course. Even an idiot can do this much, right?'

'But...'

Yasohachi wanted to object, but Ukikumo left before he could say anything –

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6

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Yasohachi was at a peasant's home in Tama –

He had asked around about the people who had lived in the row house. Since his family ran a dry goods store, he knew a fair number of people.

With Kumakichi from Marukuma's help, he finally found the person he was looking for before evening and came here.

The man sitting in front of him called himself Rokusuke. He was an old man in his seventies. Since his wife had passed away before him, he had moved to Tama, where his son lived.

At first, he had said, 'I don't really remember since it happened so long ago,' but when Yasohachi anxiously explained the situation, Rokusuke gave in and started to speak.

'It was a bad affair...' Rokusuke said in a hoarse voice.

The light of the setting sun from the window made the wrinkles on Rokusuke's face look even deeper.

'What happened?'

Yasohachi leant forward.

'I think it was seventeen years ago – '

'Seventeen – '

Around when Yasohachi had been born. It seemed like the event had occurred much earlier than he had thought.

'I lived in the room next to where the sad affair happened.'

'Is that so?' said Yasohachi. He could feel his heart racing.

'The people who lived next door were a man called Gorou and his wife.'

'What did the person named Gorou-san do?'

'He painted pictures.'

'Was he a painter?'

'Racy pictures, that kind of thing. I think he had an apprentice, but I don't know the details. Well, he didn't make that much money, so his wife worked too.'

Yasohachi hoped to be a painter himself, so he knew very well that it was difficult to live on painting alone.

Gorou had probably painted racy pictures because he had to do so to sell rather than because he wanted to.

'And?' urged Yasohachi.

'The two of them were a quiet and good couple, but there was a strange rumour – '

'A rumour?'

Yasohachi licked his dry lips.

'Apparently Gorou was a part of a group of robbers.'

'What!? Is that true?'

'I don't know. It was a rumour.'

'But why would a rumour like that...'

If there was such a salacious rumour, there had to be a reason behind it.

'Gorou was sometimes asked to paint racy pictures of prostitutes... One day, when he went to a brothel for work, somebody was robbed and killed, and Gorou was involved in it somehow.'

'He would be an awful man if that were true.'

'He didn't seem like that to me. He might've been a bit hard to please, but he got along with his neighbours and there weren't any real problems.'

Rokusuke took out a pipe and lit it. He took a puff before continuing.

'Then, that day – it was just at the end of Yayoi, the third month, if I remember correctly. My wife and I were sleeping when I heard a loud noise from the next room. At first, I thought it was a lovers' quarrel and went back to sleep, but then I heard a scream.'

'A scream?'

'My wife thought maybe Gorou's wife's birth pains had started.'

'Was his wife pregnant?'

'She was. It was about time too, so I went to take a look.'

Rokusuke took another puff. His eyes narrowed.

'What happened after you went there?' asked Yasohachi, his hands in sweaty fists.

He had a terribly bad feeling.

'I was shocked. Gorou was standing in front of his room with a face as pale as death. He had something in his left arm and a sword in his right hand.'

'A sword – '

'He did. And the sword and Gorou's clothes were all bloody.'

Rokusuke shook his head, looking pained.

Yasohachi shuddered as he imagined the scene. Though he did feel afraid, at the same time, he was also curious.

'Then what happened?' asked Yasohachi. He held his breath as he waited for Rokusuke to continue.

'Gorou ran off. My legs wouldn't move so I couldn't run after him... I just stood there in shock.'

There was a deep wrinkle between Rokusuke's eyebrows.

'What on earth happened?' urged Yasohachi.

Rokusuke nodded and continued, 'I don't know the details. I was even more shocked when I looked inside the room. What do you think was there?'

'What was there?'

'A dead body.'

'A dead body?'

'Yes. Gorou's wife's – '

'Did Gorou-san – cut her?'

'Probably. She was cut diagonally from the shoulder, but that wasn't all.'

'What do you mean?'

'The most important thing was missing.'

'The most important thing – what's that?'

'The baby.'

'Eh?'

'The wife's stomach had been slit open. The baby had been pulled out.'

Yasohachi was so shocked he couldn't speak.

The murderer had not stopped after cutting the woman to death – he had even sliced open her stomach to take out the baby. It wasn't the work of a human being.

'Had the person named Gorou gone mad?'

'Probably... Now that I think about it, Gorou had probably been holding the baby.'

'Is that true?'

'Well, I don't remember clearly. The baby's been missing since then, and Gorou's dead too...'

'Dead?'

'Came floating up in the river the next morning. Stomach sliced open. Well, that was probably, you know...'

'Suicide.' That was probably what Rokusuke meant. Yasohachi said the word with a sigh, his spirits heavy.

'Well, there was a rumour that it was a lovers' suicide, but both of them were buried at Myouhouji with nobody to tend to their graves.

'Thank you very much for your help,' said Yasohachi before standing.

Even though it had happened so long ago, Rokusuke had remembered the details, which was helpful for Rokusuke.

He was about to leave when he suddenly stopped.

'Excuse me – '

'What?'

'Rokusuke-san, did you continue to live in the row house after the incident?'

'I did, for five or six years.'

'Did somebody live next to you then?'

'Nobody. It was too disturbing.'

That made sense. Not many people would want to live there after finding out somebody had been killed there.

'Did you ever hear about a ghost appearing in the next room?' asked Yasohachi.

'Never heard anything like that,' Rokusuke replied.

If the spirit possessing Osayo was Gorou's wife, why had she started wandering seventeen years after the fact?

With that question on his mind, Yasohachi thanked Rokusuke and left the room.

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7

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'Yasohachi-san.'

Yasohachi had returned from Tama to Yotsuya and was walking when somebody suddenly called out to him. He was standing just in front of Marukuma.

He looked up and saw a face he recognized.

Hijikata from Ishida Sanyaku –

He was tall and had such lovely looks that even a man might fall in love in at first sight. He was so gorgeous that he seemed more like a kabuki actor than a chemist.

There was just one thing – his eyes always had a sharp glint in them. He was a man of many mysteries.

'Hijikata-san. Thank you for the other day.'

'What are you talking about?'

'Regarding the man who can expel spirits.'

'Ah. It was nothing. He is a man of many tempers, so please ensure that you are careful in handling him.'

Hijikata smiled slightly.

'Who's got many tempers?'

There was suddenly another voice.

Yasohachi looked up and saw Ukikumo peering out from the sliding door on the second floor of Marukuma.

He had his eyes covered with the red cloth. It seemed he could still see properly with it on.

'Stop talking and get up here already.'

Ukikumo jerked his chin towards the building.

Yasohachi thanked Hijikata once more and then went under the curtains into Marukuma. After greeting Kumakichi, Yasohachi went up to the Japanese-style room on the second floor.

Ukikumo was leaning against the wall as usual while sipping sake out of a sake cup. Yasohachi felt like this man was always drinking.

'So what did you find out?'

Ukikumo pulled the cloth off and looked at Yasohachi with his crimson eyes.

'I heard a number of things,' said Yasohachi, sitting down to face Ukikumo.

'Let me hear them.'

Ukikumo held a filled sake cup out towards Yasohachi.

Yasohachi took a slip, took a breath and then started speaking. It took some time since he explained what Rokusuke told him in detail.

Ukikumo sometimes said things like 'Hm' and 'As I thought' as he listened intently.

'The ghost possessing your sister is probably that Gorou's wife – ' said Ukikumo confidently, putting a hand on his pointed chin, after Yasohachi finished.

'How can you be sure?'

'The ghost possessing your sister was cut in her shoulder and stomach. It matches what old man Rokusuke said.'

'But Rokusuke-san's story might not be fact. It has been seventeen years after all,' said Yasohachi.

Ukikumo's left eyebrow went up as he glared at Yasohachi.

Under that pressure, Yasohachi shifted just slightly.

'You're an unexpectedly distrustful guy.'

'If you hold any preconceptions, you won't be able to see the things that you might have been able to see otherwise,' said Yasohachi, which made Ukikumo snort.

'That's a good attitude. Well, there's other proof.'

'What proof?'

'The wife of the guy called Gorou was called Kayo.'

'How do you know that?'

'Got Hijikata to look into it for me. You can trust what he says.'

So that was why Hijikata was in front of Marukuma earlier – now Yasohachi understood.

He didn't know what methods Hijikata used, but he felt like if anyone, Hijikata would be able to get that information. He was a man who had such a strange atmosphere to him.

'However, there is something I don't understand,' asked Yasohachi, changing the topic.

'What?'

'From the conversation yesterday, the ghost possessing my sister is searching for the person who killed her – correct?'

'Yeah.'

'But if we summarise what we've learnt, the person named Kayo would know that the person who killed her was her husband, Gorou.'

Rokusuke had heard the sound of fighting and a scream, so Kayo probably hadn't been cut in her sleep.

Even if it had been dark, it had been her husband. She must have noticed.

'Probably,' Ukikumo replied readily.

'That makes things troublesome then. Gorou is already dead. There's nothing to be done.'

'That would be true if Kayo were searching for Gorou,' Ukikumo said offhandedly, stretching his arms out.

He made it sound like it didn't concern him at all. Well, it didn't actually concern him, but after coming all this way, Yasohachi would be troubled if Ukikumo didn't accompany him until the end.

'Please don't say something so irresponsible. At this rate, my sister...'

Ukikumo interrupted Yasohachi with a wave of his hand.

'Don't be in such a rush.'

'But...'

'I said this earlier, right? If Kayo were searching for Gorou, there'd be no way to find him. But there's still hope if she's searching for someone else.'

'Someone else... Who would that be?' asked Yasohachi, leaning forward.

Ukikumo sighed in exasperation. 'I can't tell if you're sharp or dull.'

Even if Ukikumo said that, Yasohachi didn't understand the things he didn't understand.

'Please explain what you mean.'

'I mean, somebody's gone missing since that incident, right?'

Yasohachi immediately understood what Ukikumo meant.

'So Kayo is searching for her son?'

'That's it.'

Though Yasohachi understood, at the same time, his heart sank.

'However, if we think about the situation, the child is probably...'

– Not living.

They were back at the start. If the baby was dead, they had no way of finding him, same as with Gorou.

In contrast to Yasohachi in his shock, a meaningful smile appeared on Ukikumo's smile as he finished his sake in one gulp.

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8

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Yasohachi knelt on the wooden floor of Myouhouji.

Ukikumo had his eyes covered with the usual red cloth, covering his crimson eyes. He knelt on one knee, supporting himself with his staff.

The candlelight shook, even though there was no wind.

'What happened to Osayo-san afterwards?' asked Dousai, the Myouhouji monk sitting opposite them.

Dousai had been the first to attempt to expel the spirit from Osayo.

He had a warm personality. Though he was of a rather high rank, he didn't let that get to his head. Because Dousai was like that, Yasohachi thought he didn't need to hide anything.

'Well... It doesn't seem like she is getting any better...'

'Is that so? I apologise for not being of any help.'

Dousai bowed his head deeply.

'Please lift your head. I do not blame you even the slightest.'

'No, I must apologise to Genta-san as well.'

'My father knows that you did all you could.'

'But...'

Dousai swallowed his words and turned his eyes towards Ukikumo.

Though Dousai did not say it aloud, it was clear that he was suspicious about why Ukikumo was here.

'This is Ukikumo-san. Er...'

Yasohachi was about to introduce Ukikumo, but he hesitated to call him an exorcist in front of Dousai.

That would definitely make it seem like he blamed Dousai.

'Me and Hachi are friends of sorts,' said Ukikumo as he poured sake from his gourd into the sake cup he kept at his waist.

'Friend?'

Dousai furrowed his brows.

'I heard about Osayo-san from Hachi and had an idea, so I got him to bring me here,' said Ukikumo nonchalantly.

'What do you mean?' asked Dousai.

'The ghost possessing Osayo-san is probably a woman named Kayo who was killed in the row house near here seventeen years ago.'

'Kayo? How do you know that?'

'Kayo's my older sister, though we've never met.'

Perhaps Ukikumo's heavy weigh of putting it had convinced Dousai, as he replied, 'So that's how it is,' though he still seemed doubtful.

That was quite something, since Ukikumo had just been spewing out lies.

'I heard that my older sister was buried here,' said Ukikumo.

'She was,' said Dousai with a nod. 'Kayo-san was buried here because of her connection to Genta-san.'

'Connection to my father?' said Yasohachi without thinking.

'Yes. Kayo-san was an assistant at Genta-san's shop.'

'Is that so...'

It was the first Yasohachi had heard of it.

'Actually, Kayo-san's husband, Gorou, was Genta-san's childhood friend. Well, I was too... Anyway, that was the connection.'

Yasohachi had never heard that before. It had been before Yasohachi was born though, so it made sense that he didn't know.

Furthermore, Gorou might have killed his wife and himself. His father had probably not wanted to talk about it.

'I want to visit her grave,' said Ukikumo.

Dousai nodded.

'There's an unmarked grave in the back, but...' Dousai stopped talking.

'Is there some sort of problem?'

'Actually, because of the heavy rain ten days ago, the ground broke and the gravestone fell. I am ashamed to say it, but it has not yet been rectified...'

Come to think of it, there had been terrible rain the day Osayo was possessed too. The river had swelled up and the ground had come loose. There had been damages everywhere.

Ukikumo put a hand to his chin with an 'Oh'.

'Did you figure something out?' asked Yasohachi.

Ukikumo slowly turned his head towards him.

The eyes drawn on the red cloth looked straight through Yasohachi.

'Yeah. I know why Kayo's ghost appeared now – '

That had been bothering Yasohachi.

She had been killed for seventeen years. From what Rokusuke said, there hadn't been any ghost sightings at the row house either.

'Why?'

'The gravestone moved, that's why.'

'Eh?'

'That happens sometimes. Some change wakes up a sleeping spirit.'

Ukikumo's red lips twisted into a smile.

Yasohachi shivered, even though he was in a muggy temple.

'Are you a monk?' asked Dousai, who had been listening to the conversation.

'No, definitely not. As you can see, I'm blind.'

'Even if you can't see, you can walk the path of Buddhism.'

'True. Then it's a problem of attitude. Anyway, I'm a fool who wouldn't even be able to write the B in Buddhism if you asked.'

Ukikumo took a sip of sake, as if he were proud.

After seeing that, Dousai's expression clouded just slightly, but he didn't say anything.

'By the way, what sort of man was Gorou?' asked Ukikumo after a pause.

'Hm... When he was young, he was a man of few words who was always painting.'

'How about swordsmanship?'

'None to speak of. He was unskilled at moving his body.'

'Was he the sort of man who would slice his wife open?'

'No – is what I want to say, but he did, so...'

'Right. To me, he's the villain who killed my sister,' said Ukikumo, his tone challenging.

It would be a natural tone if Kayo were his older sister, but that was a lie. Dousai didn't know that, so with a solemn expression, he said, 'I apologise.'

'To tell the truth – ' That was how Dousai began, but then he left a pause. It felt like he wasn't sure whether he should speak. Finally, he took a breath and then said, 'That night, Gorou came to this temple.'

'By himself?' asked Ukikumo.

'Yes, by himself. He came covered in blood. He had a sword in his hand. When I asked him why, he told me that he had killed his wife.'

'And the reason?'

Dousai shook his head.

'He just said that he still had something to do and that he wanted me to bury his wife.'

The wrinkles on Dousai's face grew deeper.

'What happened afterwards?'

'He said what he needed to and then ran off with the sword. The next day, he was found floating in the river...'

Dousai sighed. The candles' flames trembled.

Yasohachi understood. What Gorou had had to do was kill himself. To take responsibility for his actions.

It was silent in the temple –

How long did the silence last? Suddenly, Ukikumo stood up.

'Was he really alone?'

As Ukikumo said that in a reverberant voice, he put his staff on his shoulder.

Dousai looked up at Ukikumo and nodded.

'Lying's not good.'

'Eh?'

Yasohachi was the one who was surprised.

Ukikumo ignored Yasohachi and looked down at Dousai. The eyes on the cloth seemed to glow with a demonic light.

'He wasn't alone, right?'

'What do you mean?'

'Gorou should have had someone with him.'

'Someone?'

'A newborn child.'

– Oh!

Gorou had cut open Kayo's stomach and taken out a baby. He had run off with that baby in his hands. So that baby had gone to Myouhouji.

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

Dousai shook his head firmly.

Ukikumo crouched in front of Dousai and put his face up close.

'Is it OK?'

'Is what OK?'

'For somebody following the path of Buddha to lie in front of Buddha.'

Ukikumo's words made Dousai's face twitch. Yasohachi could tell that Dousai's lips, pressed tightly together, were trembling slightly.

The statue of Buddha in the back of the temple seemed to glare at Dousai.

'Does your Buddha lie?' continued Ukikumo, pointing at the Buddha statue with his staff.

Dousai looked away and was silent for a while, but his shoulders finally slumped down in resignation.

'It is just as you say,' he murmured.

Ukikumo nodded in satisfaction and stood up.

'Where's that baby?'

'I can't say that now,' Dousai replied immediately.

His tone was firm, completely different from what it had been before.

From this response, it seemed like the baby that Gorou had taken from Kayo's stomach was still living. Furthermore, Dousai knew where the baby went.

'Could you tell us, please?' begged Yasohachi.

If they could find the baby, they might be able to expel Kayo's spirit from Oayo.

Yasohachi was desperate. However, no matter how Yasohachi pleaded, he did not open his mouth.

'It's fine,' said Ukikumo, placing a hand on Yasohachi's shoulder.

'But...'

They still didn't know the most important thing. Furthermore, Dousai knew the answer. If they backed down now, they wouldn't be able to save Osayo.

'It's fine, since I have a pretty good guess.'

After declaring that, Ukikumo left the temple briskly.

Yasohachi was about to chase after him when Dousai called out.

'Yasohachi-san, stop this already.'

'What do you mean?'

'It is for your own good,' said Dousai, letting out a small sigh.

Yasohachi didn't understand. He just bowed and left.

Ukikumo was outside, staff on his shoulder. His @pse gave him the overwhelming presence of an excellent swordsman.

'Is it really OK for us not to get the answer from him?' Yasohachi asked first.

The answer was right there. Dousai definitely knew where Kayo's baby was.

'It's pointless,' Ukikumo said immediately.

'But...'

'That monk won't talk no matter what we say.'

'Why?'

'He couldn't say. Not in that situation, at least.'

'Please speak in a way that I'll understand.'

'You don't have to know right now,' said Ukikumo. Then, he started to walk.

Yasohachi followed him as if dragged along.

Ukikumo walked to the unmarked graves behind the temple. Just as Dousai had said, the ground was broken and the gravestone had fallen.

'If not for the heavy rain, my sister would not have been possessed by Kayo's ghost,' said Yasohachi.

Ukikumo pulled the red cloth down.

In the moonlight, his crimson eyes seemed to let off an unearthly light.

'Maybe. But this might have been fate.'

'Fate? What do you mean?'

'I want to meet your dad.'

Ukikumo's response had nothing to do with Yasohachi's question.

'Why is it necessary for you to meet my father?'

'In order to ask whether you should know the answer.'

It was like some Zen question.

Yasohachi had no idea what Ukikumo was thinking at all –

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Yasohachi had his arms crossed in front of the desk in his room.

He had brought Ukikumo to his father, Genta, just as Ukikumo asked. Though Yasohachi had intended on talking together, he had been chased out of the room.

The two of them had been in the room ever since, not taking one step out.

Yasohachi wanted to know what they were talking about, so he tried to listen through the sliding door, but Ukikumo had noticed immediately and chased him away.

Yasohachi looked at the painting on the wall.

Even though nothing had changed, the gaze of the painted woman seemed incredibly sad.

What was the strange beating in his chest?

'Sorry for the wait – '

The door suddenly opened and Ukikumo appeared, red cloth over his eyes.

'Ah!'

Yasohachi leapt back in surprise. Ukikumo snorted.

'You've got no guts.'

'I'm surprised because you suddenly showed up.'

'That's why I said you have no guts.'

'More importantly, what did you talk with my father about?' asked Yasohachi.

Ukikumo's lips turned up in a meaningful smile.

'I got him to decide.'

'Decide?'

'In order to expel the spirit from your sister, he had to be prepared to sacrifice something big.'

'Prepared to sacrifice...'

'Yeah. Your dad's decided.'

'Prepared for what?'

– And what does he mean by sacrifice?

The door opened again, interrupting Yasohachi's question. It was Genta and Kanichi. They were carrying Osayo, who was asleep.

'Please put Osayo-san there – '

Ukikumo pointed at the centre of the room.

Genta and Kanichi put Osayo where Ukikumo pointed.

'Now, please leave the rest to me,' declared Ukikumo. Kanichi bowed and left the room. Genta was about to do the same when he stopped and turned towards Yasohachi.

Their gazes met-

There were traces of tears in those eyes. However, his expression was not weak – it was filled with a strong will.

'Sorry...' Genta said in a hoarse voice.

'Eh?'

'I cared for you. That's why I didn't want you to paint...'

Genta's tight fists were shaking slightly.

– Why is he talking about that now?

Yasohachi didn't understand.

He couldn't relax. It felt like he was standing atop a cloud.

'I...'

Though his mouth opened, nothing else came out.

Genta smiled gently and then said, 'I'll leave the rest to you.' He bowed deeply towards Ukikumo and left the room.

For some reason, Yasohachi felt like he wouldn't be able to meet his father ever again. He wanted to chase after him, but his body wouldn't move.

'Now, let's start.'

Ukikumo took a gulp straight from his gourd and wiped his mouth with his kimono sleeve.

It felt like he was trying to cheer Yasohachi up.

'Start what?'

'To expel the spirit.'

'Are we really starting?' asked Yasohachi, lifting himself up.

'That's what you want, right?'

That was true. Yasohachi wanted to save Osayo. However, his heart had been beating wildly since earlier.

He didn't want to see what happened after this – it was like his heart was telling him that.

His forehead was sweating.

He had an unpleasant feeling, as if somebody was watching him.

It was the gaze from the painting of the woman on the wall –

'I...'

Yasohachi had started to speak when Ukikumo grabbed him by the collar and pulled him close.

At some point, the red cloth had come off Ukikumo's eyes.

His crimson eyes looked straight at Yasohachi.

'Listen carefully. I can save your sister, but you've got to be prepared.'

'Prepared...'

'Yeah. You have to prepare yourself.'

'What do you mean?'

'If I expel the spirit from her, you won't be able to return to where you are.'

'Where I am?'

What did Ukikumo mean by where he was? What did he mean, Yasohachi wouldn't be able to return? Would he have to go somewhere? Where would he go? To paradise, or perhaps to hell?

The endless questions kept coming.

'You won't be able to be who you've been up until now. You will not be able to return.'

'What if I say no?'

'Then your sister will die.'

'Die?'

Ukikumo looked at Osayo, who was lying on the floor.

Ever since Osayo had been possessed, she hadn't been eating properly. Her cheeks were hollow and she looked as pale as somebody already dead.

Perhaps her life was being drained out of her.

Just as Ukikumo said, Osayo probably couldn't stay like this much longer. All that awaited her was – death.

'Then what will you do? Tell me your decision.'

The red eyes questioned him.

The answer was obvious. He had made that decision from the start. Yasohachi didn't know what Ukikumo was going to do or where the place he was was or where he would go.

However, regardless of that, it would be better than Osayo's death.

Even if he would lose the person he had been up until now –

'Please save my sister,' pleaded Yasohachi.

'I accept your decision!' said Ukikumo with a bewitching grin.

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'Then let us begin – ' declared Ukikumo, hitting the tatami with his staff.

The floor shook slightly.

With that tremor, Osayo's eyelids fluttered open.

There was no light in those eyes. They were dark. Nothing was reflected in them. They were the eyes of a corpse.

'It appears you are awake – Kayo-san.'

Ukikumo spoke in a voice that carried well.

In response, Osayo let out a moan.

Saliva dripped out of her half-open mouth.

'You must be suffering,' said Ukikumo, his voice gentler than Yasohachi had ever heard it. It appeared this man had a kind heart that didn't seem like him at all.

Osayo stood up. A noxious gas seemed to be coming out of her.

Yasohachi trembled under that force and pressed up against the wall to escape Osayo.

Meanwhile, Ukikumo, facing Osayo, didn't budge at all.

'Can you see as well?' asked Ukikumo, pointing at his own eyes.

'These red eyes – '

Osayo groaned.

'These red eyes can see the spirits of the dead. In short, they can see ghosts. I can see you. That is – '

Ukikumo stopped here.

His eyes met Osayo's.

'The way of the red eye – '

Ukikumo's voice rang as he slammed the staff into the tatami again.

The candles shook along with their flames.

'Wheeeeeerrree...'

Osayo's eyes were wide open as she bared her teeth, her face contorted into an expression of rage.

– Just like a demon.

Yasohachi now understood the depth of the darkness that Kayo held.

He didn't know the details of what had happened, but she hadn't just been killed by her husband, Gorou – he had sliced her stomach open and pulled out her baby.

It must have cut away at her heart.

How would Ukikumo clear away such strong emotions – with the child in question still nowhere to be found?

'Wheeeere did you goo!?' screamed Osayo, reaching forward with both hands to grab Ukikumo's neck.

– Ah!

Yasohachi was about to go help, but Ukikumo stopped him.

Even though his face was red from being strangled, His crimson eyes were still looking at Osayo.

'Are you looking for the child that had been in your belly?' asked Ukikumo in a hoarse voice.

That instant, Osayo's expression changed.

Her wide-open eyes closed slightly and her cheeks twitched.

'Do you... know...' asked Osayo.

'Yes, I do.'

Perhaps Osayo had loosened her grip, as Ukikumo's voice was clearer than it had been before.

'W-wheerre...'

'Your child – is a boy.'

Nobody had mentioned anything about Kayo's child being a boy or girl. How did Ukikumo know?

Ukikumo continued despite Yasohachi's question.

'Seventeen years have passed since you died. That boy has grown up splendidly.'

– Again.

How could he say the boy had grown up splendidly even though they didn't know where the baby had gone?

The deeper Yasohachi's doubts grew, the louder his heart beat.

He wanted to know the reason, but at the same time, he didn't want to know. No, he felt like he couldn't know.

'He must take after his father. He likes painting.'

– What is he saying?

A cold sweat poured down Yasohachi's forehead.

'Gorou-san left the baby at Myouhouji and then somebody raised him. The owner of a dry goods shop. His name –'

'Stop!' shouted Yasohachi without thinking.

What was Ukikumo saying? It was as if –

'Why are you acting so mad?'

'I mean, from what you just said, it's as if I... No. That's ridiculous.'

'It isn't ridiculous.'

'You have no proof.'

'I do.'

'Wha –'

'The monk named Dousai didn't say where the baby went, even though he knew. He said, "I can't say that now." Do you know why?'

The monk had said that. When he said 'now', he had meant that he couldn't say in front of Yasohachi then. But –

'If that's all...'

'I have other proof.'

'...'

'Kayo was killed and the baby was taken out of her at the end of the Yayoi month – which means the eighty-eighth night. You get it, right?'

– And so my name is Yasohachi, written with the characters for eighty-eight.

That was probably what Ukikumo meant.

'Stop joking. My father had reasons...'

'Your father hated how you painted. Even though he was normally gentle and let you do whatever you want – why did he not want you to paint?'

Gorou had been a painter. Then, he had gone mad and killed his wife. Had his father thought the same thing would happen to him if he continued painting?

Though the logic lined up, Yasohachi still couldn't accept it.

'That's not true.'

'It is. I checked with your father. I checked that it was all right for me to tell you this too.'

Ukikumo's words shook Yasohachi.

He couldn't stand. He fell to the tatami on his knees.

'Stand.'

Ukikumo grabbed Yasohachi's collar and forced him up.

His red eyes stared at Yasohachi.

'You decided to save your sister, right? Even though you knew you wouldn't be able to return – '

Yasohachi's body was trembling.

He escaped Ukikumo's grasp and backed away.

However, the wall stopped him immediately. He had nowhere to run.

– So this is what he meant!

Yasohachi finally understood Ukikumo's words.

The steady world he had lived in up until now was crumbling underneath him. He was trying to cling to something, but it was pointless. There was nothing for him to cling to.

It felt like he was sinking into a bottomless swamp.

If this were going to happen, it would have better not to save – no, Yasohachi wouldn't stand for that.

Then what was he supposed to have done? He asked himself, but no answer came to him. Of course no answer came.

No matter how he floundered now, it was too late.

Even though he would have been able to continue living peacefully if he had known nothing – but he knew now. He had found out.

Now – he could not return.

He was not Genta's child, nor was he Osayo's younger brother. The people he had thought were family were complete strangers.

'The baby you're looking for – '

Ukikumo paused.

then, he slowly pointed at Yasohachi.

'Is right there – '

Osayo turned towards Yasohachi.

The demonic expression that had been on her face earlier was gone. It was gentle, warm and familiar.

– I see.

Yasohachi understood.

Osayo – no, Kayo – was not filled with hatred.

It was a deep love –

She didn't care about her own life at all. She didn't care who killed her.

Even after her death, Kayo had just wanted to make sure her child was safe.

A tear fell from Osayo's eyes.

'Mother – '

The word naturally came out of Yasohachi's mouth.

Osayo walked towards Yasohachi. He felt no more fear. She was his mother.

A mother who had never embraced her child even once and still loved him enough to continue caring for him.

Osayo put her arms around Yasohachi and hugged him tightly.

In Osayo's arms, Yasohachi felt like he could feel his mother, Kay.

Kayo sobbed and said something. Yasohachi hadn't heard them clearly, but he felt like they had been a cry of happiness.

Yasohachi cried as well.

He himself wasn't sure what his tears meant, but he could feel something that had been empty in his heart filling up.

'Mother.'

He said it once more, and as if that had been a sign, the strength left Osayo's body.

– What just happened?

Yasohachi looked at Ukikumo, who nodded.

'Your mum's gone.'

After saying that, Ukikumo looked up.

'I see...'

Yasohachi followed Ukikumo's gaze, but he couldn't see anything.

– I envy him.

He honestly thought that. If he had red eyes like Ukikumo, he might have been able to see his mother's face.

After telling Ukikumo that, Ukikumo laughed.

'Haven't you been looking at your mother for years?'

Ukikumo pointed at the wall with his staff.

There was a painting there. A painting of a woman looking at water lilies.

– I see. That woman is my mother. The person who painted this was probably my father.

'Yasohachi...'

He heard a hoarse voice.

Yasohachi saw Osayo looking up from within his arms.

Her eyes were different from how they had been earlier. They were beautiful and full of light. They were definitely Osayo's eyes.

'Sister!'

Though Yasohachi exclaimed in happiness, he felt his heart whisper.

Could he continue to call Osayo his sister after this?

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Yasohachi was in his futon, but he couldn't sleep.

After that, Ukikumo had left. Osayo had collapsed there, extremely exhausted.

Though Yasohachi had met with Genta, they hadn't said anything.

He must have known that Yasohachi knew the truth. Perhaps he couldn't think of what to say.

Yasohachi felt the same way. He didn't know what to say to him.

For seventeen years – he had been Genta's child. He had never doubted that. Now, that had suddenly changed.

No, for Genta, Yasohachi had never been his real child.

Yasohachi had unknowingly shown his interest in painting – the foolishness of that made Yasohachi shudder. Of course Genta had opposed it.

Yasohachi looked at his right hand.

He couldn't see it clearly in the dark, but the blood of a man who had killed his wife ran through it.

No, it wasn't just his hand. The blood ran through every corner of his body.

Hateful cursed blood –

'I really can't return...' murmured Yasohachi.

Suddenly, he felt someone's presence. Yasohachi sat up. He could see something like a piece of paper between the sliding door and the wall.

He slowly got up and took it in his hand. It was a letter. He opened the door and went into the corridor. There was nobody there any more.

He read the words in the moonlight.

The blood left his face –

I have Osayo.

If you want her back safely, come to the row house alone.

If you tell anyone, Osayo's life will come to an end.

Yasohachi ran down the corridor to Osayo's room and opened the door.

It was empty. Yasohachi gripped the letter in his hand tightly.

– Who on earth did this, and what for?

He couldn't think about that now. He had to save Osayo as soon as possible.

He had already started running.

– Why am I running so frantically?

That question suddenly came to Yasohachi's head as he ran down the road to the row house. Osayo wasn't his sister. They were complete strangers.

– Is that really true? Even if we aren't related by blood, does that mean my life up until now was a lie?

'No!'

Yasohachi shouted that aloud.

Osayo had been the one who took care of him when he had a high fever. She had come to help him straight away when the neighbourhood kids were bullying him. She had been the one who helped Genta and him make up when they fought. It had always been Osayo.

Even if they weren't related by blood, that didn't make the time they had spent as family a lie. Even if that was just how Yasohachi thought, still –

Yasohachi, panting, reached the row house.

The fateful row house where his mother had died and he had been born.

It was completely dark. Though it was dark around him, the entrance to the row house was even darker. It felt like the entrance to hell.

To be honest, he was afraid. But –

Yasohachi peered in with determination.

At first, he couldn't see anything, but soon his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness.

He saw a woman in a white nightdress in the corner of the room.

It was – Osayo.

'Sister,' he said, which made Osayo look up and shake her head frantically.

There was a gag on her mouth so she couldn't speak. Her hands and feet were bound with rope as well.

– I need to save her right away.

He was about to go in when he heard a footstep from behind him.

He turned around instinctively.

A man was standing there. He had a sword at his waist. He had a washcloth on his head and was covering his mouth and nose with a cloth.

His glinting eyes looked right at Yasohachi.

'Why did you do this?'

The man didn't respond to Yasohachi's words.

His antagonistic eyes kept staring at Yasohachi as his right foot stepped forward, right hand on the sword handle.

He wasn't an amateur. It was clear that he was practised in swordsmanship.

When Yasohachi thought that, one man's face came up right away.

– Kumakichi.

He would know about this case and he was also a good swordsman, but Yasohachi couldn't think of a reason for him to do this.

'Who are you?'

The man still didn't answer.

His killing intent was clear. He gripped the handle tightly.

– Will he draw?

Yasohachi's forehead was covered in sweat.

Unfortunately, Yasohachi knew nothing about swordsmanship. He had weak arms on top of that.

If he tried to fight back, he would be cut down immediately, and if he turned around to run, the result would probably be the same.

He couldn't run away and leave Osayo here anyway.

If he was going to be cut down either way, he wanted to save Osayo, at least. HE would have to leap forward and sacrifice his own life.

The moment he was about to step out, somebody shouted, 'Are you an idiot!'

It wasn't the man in front of him. The proof was the man's shock as he turned around to look.

'Where are you looking? I'm here.'

The voice spoke again.

It came from the entrance to the row house.

Yasohachi looked in and saw, in the dark, a man wearing a completely white kimono. His skin was white enough to compete with the colour of the kimono. His hair was unkempt and he had a red cloth over his eyes.

'Ukikumo-san!' exclaimed Yasohachi.

Ukikumo grinned at him.

Instead of the usual staff, he had a sword in its scabbard.

'You were thinking about rushing him, right? You're an idiot, as usual.'

Ukikumo walked forward.

Perhaps it had been an idiotic idea, but –

'I wanted to save my sister...'

'Relax. Osayo's here.'

Ukikumo pointed his chin towards the entrance to the row house. Osayo was standing there. Her ropes were loosened and the gag was off her mouth.

It seemed like Ukikumo had saved her while Yasohachi was facing the man.

– But why is Ukikumo here?

Before Yasohachi could ask, Ukikumo pushed Yasohachi aside to stand in front of the man.

'Give it up already,' Ukikumo said to the man.

'You...' growled the man. Yasohachi recognized that voice.

'I'll let it go if you back down here. But if you fight back, I've got an idea myself.'

'An idea?'

'I'll cut you down,' said Ukikumo in a dark voice.

The man laughed.

'You're going to cut me down, blind man?'

'Blind? Who said that? I can see. I can see more than you can.'

'What idiocy –'

'That is – the reason of the red eye.'

Ukikumo smiled, showing his teeth. He pulled the red cloth down.

In the moonlight, his crimson eyes glowed with a demonic light.

'Wha...'

The man backed away.

'I'm just going to say this, but I'm strong. Just lay down your sword like a good kid.'

Ukikumo stepped forward to make up for the distance the man put between them.

His very existence was that of overwhelming pressure. Even Yasohachi, who knew nothing about swordsmanship, could tell that Ukikumo had to be quite good.

'I'll say it once more. Lay down your sword.'

Ukikumo's warning didn't reach the man.

The man unsheathed his sword.

'Idiot,' said Ukikumo with a click of his tongue.

'Ey!'

The man pulled out his sword with bloodshot eyes and slashed.

– He cut Ukikumo!

That was what Yasohachi thought, but Ukikumo was fine.

He had quickly put distance between him and the man. The man's slash had missed.

'You make too many pointless movements.'

Ukikumo smiled, full of confidence.

'What?' said the man in an unstrung voice.

'You put too much force into it and make yourself slower.'

You!' shouted the man angrily, raising his sword high above him.

It was a forceful stance, but Ukikumo did not move.

'If you put that much force into it, your blade will lose its sharpness.'

'Shut up!'

The man used that force to swing down.

Ukikumo evaded the slice with only the movements that were absolutely necessary, dancing on his toes.

As if to mock the man whose movements he had evaded so easily, Ukikumo hit the man's arm with his sword still in its scabbard.

The man's hand dropped the sword and he fell to the ground, his body twisted into the shape of a gourd.

'This is the end. Give it up already.'

Ukikumo put the tip of his scabbard to the man's sweaty chin. The man just let out a groan.

Ukikumo sighed and turned towards Yasohachi.

And then – the man moved.

He got up and started running, picking up the sword he had dropped. 'Die!' he cried out, leaping up to slice Ukikumo.

'Are you so desperate to die?'

Ukikumo quickly unsheathed his sword and sliced the man diagonally from the shoulder.

The man fell down face up, unable to even let out a scream.

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Yasohachi was stunned for a while by all the events, but he came back to his senses and looked towards Osayo.

'Sister!'

Osayo's eyes went wide in surprise, but she walked toward him.

'Are you all right?'

'Yes.'

'Thank goodness.'

Yasohachi took Osayo's hands in his own. When he felt their warmth, he finally felt like she was safe. It was all thanks to Ukikumo.

The man in question looked bitter.

Osayo's eyes were probably pointed straight at Ukikumo's crimson eyes.

Ukikumo had said before that his red eyes frightened others.

'Sister, this is...'

Yasohachi was about to explain, but Osayo spoke before he could.

'How beautiful!'

As Osayo said that, she looked entranced.

They were probably words straight from her heart.

'Honestly. Both the brother and sister are idiots,' said Ukikumo with a click of his tongue, covering his eyes with the red cloth again.

After a pause, Yasohachi was concerned about something.

'Did you kill him?' asked Yasohachi, looking at the man on the floor.

Ukikumo nodded. 'Like I could kill him with this.'

The sword that Ukikumo had been holding was a bamboo one. It was true that it would be impossible to kill someone with that.

Ukikumo walked up to the man and pulled the cloth covering his mouth and nose away with his bamboo sword.

– It was Kanichi.

'Why would Kanichi...'

At first, Yasohachi had thought it was Kumakichi, but he had realised it wasn't upon hearing the voice. That said, he didn't understand why Kanichi had done this.

'Do you remember when I first went to your house?' asked Ukikumo.

'Yes.'

Osayo had escaped from the storeroom and had been acting violently with a knife.

'That had been incredibly unnatural. That guy explained it away as Osayo having found the knife in the storeroom, but that doesn't make sense.'

'Which means?'

'Kayo was searching for her child. Not a knife. And there was no reason for her to attack.'

Now that he mentioned it.

'In short, Kanichi tried to kill my sister when he went into the storeroom with the knife, but she fought back?'

'Well, that's probably what happened. Anyway, his actions had been incredibly suspicious. I got Toshizou to look into him.'

'Hijikata-san?'

'Yeah. Toshizou's a merchant, see. He doesn't need to go out of his way to look things up – he already knows.'

'I see.'

'Kanichi used to be a peasant in Tama. He left the village to become a samurai, but it didn't go well so he began a life of thievery.'

'Is that so?'

Yasohachi looked at Kanichi.

He didn't seem like the sort at all, but people had hidden faces to them.

'Well, at first he just stole loose change. It didn't change his livelihood. He was probably thinking of making one big robbery and then starting up a shop to settle down.'

'Could it be...'

'The rest of this is only my theory, but – '

Ukikumo said that before continuing.

'Seventeen years ago – the robber that entered the brothel was Kanichi.'

'Then Gorou...'

'I can't say he wasn't related at all. This is also a theory, but Kanichi was just one person. He couldn't pull off a big robbery by himself, so he needed an accomplice. There, he found Gorou.'

'Why Gorou?'

'They probably met at the brothel. Gorou went in and out as a painter, and Kanichi as a patron. Gorou was about to have a child. However, he didn't make enough money from painting. Kanichi had probably known that when he approached him.'

'That doesn't become a reason to aid in a robbery.'

'Now, don't say that. People will do anything when they're in a corner.'

It was sad, but perhaps it was true.

'What a series of events,' muttered Yasohachi.

Osayo gripped Yasohachi's shoulder as if to comfort him.

'But Gorou hadn't thought somebody would die. In his guilt, he tried to give himself in

Yasohachi could see the gist of things after Ukikumo had explained this much.

'So then he fought Kanichi.'

'Yeah. It wasn't just a robbery. Somebody had died. There'd be a death penalty. Then he might as well just kill him too – that was probably what Kanichi had thought.'

'Then – perhaps – '

'Yeah. Gorou didn't kill your mother, Kayo. This scoundrel did.'

Ukikumo looked at Kanichi again.

'B-but Dousai-san said that Gorou said he'd killed her – '

Gorou had said it himself.

'He felt guilty. Because he had committed robbery, his wife had died. That was why it was his fault. It was the same as killing her himself – that's what he felt.'

'Did Kanichi cut open her stomach to take out the baby?'

'That was probably Gorou. Well, Kayo was probably the one who asked him to.'

'W-why?'

Something so frightening –

'Love.'

'Love?'

'When Gorou went back home, Kanichi had probably been there too. They fought, but he got away. All that was left was the sword and Kayo, covered in blood.'

Rokusuke had heard a fight. That had probably been it.

'Kayo was still alive then, but at the same time, she had known that she couldn't be saved. At this rate, the baby in her belly would save too. So – '

'She asked Gorou to take the baby out.'

'Like I said, love,' replied Ukikumo.

It was true that perhaps that was love. Kayo – his mother – had gone that far to try to protect her child.

Yasohachi couldn't even imagine the pain of having your stomach cut open while still alive.

Gorou had taken the child out and left him at Myouhouji, a temple he was acquainted with, and he left his child and his wife's burial to the monk there.

No, there was still something that Yasohachi didn't understand.

'Why did Gorou kill himself?'

'He didn't.'

'Eh?'

'Think about it. Would a man who wasn't a samurai choose to slice his stomach to kill himself?'

Yasohachi understood once Ukikumo said that.

Gorou wasn't a samurai. It would be strange for him to choose seppuku. It didn't fit the situation.

'That's true. That means Gorou was...'

'Killed.'

'By whom?'

'Kanichi.'

'So that's how it was...' said Yasohachi in a hoarse voice.

An unexplainable feeling writhed within him.

'Anyway, Kanichi took the money then and started a shop, but it didn't go well. He was wandering around, unsure what to do with his life, when your father happened to pick him up.'

While Yasohachi understood what had happened thus far, another question came to him.

'Why did Kanichi try to kill my sister and then kidnap her?'

'He noticed that the ghost possessing your sister was Kayo. He was afraid that she might reveal his crimes.'

'What!?'

'Even after the spirit was expelled, he was still suspicious. He knew that you were Kayo's son, so he had probably intended on killing both of you. Then he'd take the money from the shop and escape somewhere. The work of a man worth no more than rubbish.'

After Ukikumo finished saying that, Kanichi woke up and let out a moan.

Yasohachi saw Kanichi trying to crawl away.

However, Ukikumo grabbed Kanichi by the hair to stop him and pulled him up.

'Where do you think you're going?'

Ukikumo brought Kanichi's face close to his and pulled down the red cloth again.

Kanichi shrieked under the glare of those crimson eyes.

'It's fine. I won't kill you. I can see the spirits of the dead. I don't want to be possessed by rubbish like you.'

'L-let me go.'

Kanichi writhed about.

'Sure. I'll let you go. You can go anywhere you want.'

Ukikumo let go of Kanichi.

Yasohachi was surprised at how readily Ukikumo had released Kanichi. Yasohachi wouldn't stand for it if Kanichi came back for revenge.

Osayo looked anxious. It seemed she felt the same way.

However, Ukikumo was different.

His lips were twisted in an uncanny smile.

'But don't forget. He's always with you.'

'W-what?'

Kanichi's face twitched.

'Gorou's possessing you. For these seventeen years, you've tried to work properly, but nothing's gone right. You think that was coincidence?'

Kanichi had no reply to Ukikumo's words.

However, his face grew visibly paler –

'Gorou's watching you. Always – '

'You're lying,' said Kanichi, looking like he might cry.

'I'm not. Look. He's right there behind you.'

Ukikumo pointed behind Kanichi.

Kanichi frantically turned around and screamed, 'Stay away! Stay away!'

'It's pointless. Gorou will always be with you. You can't escape.'

'Aaahh!'

Kanichi collapsed and held his head in his hands.

Ukikumo murmured this into his ear.

'That's what it means to kill someone – '

Kanichi let out a scream and ran into the darkness, waving his hands wildly –

'Is Gorou-san – no, is my father really possessing Kanichi?' asked Yasohachi.

Ukikumo snorted. 'Your birth father and mother just wanted their child to be happy. They have no reason to possess a scoundrel like him.'

'Then – '

'That was a curse.'

As Ukikumo said that, his red eyes seemed somewhat sad –

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epilogue

-

A few days after that, Yasohachi went to the shrine.

The shrine which Ukikumo had made his stronghold.

'Hello – '

When he called out in front of the shrine, the door opened and Ukikumo came out.

He was wearing a white kimono with the obi sloppily wrapped around him. The red cloth was covering his eyes as usual.

'What, it's you, Hachi?'

Ukikumo yawned and sat down on the steps.

'Hello.'

'What do you want then?'

Ukikumo poured sake into the cup at his waist and drank it all at once.

'I talked with my father and sister after that.'

'And?'

'They said that I could continue to be my father's son and my sister's brother.'

'How lucky. You've got a big family,' Ukikumo said brusquely.

Osayo had said the same thing.

His mother, Kayo, had tried to protect her child even though it meant giving up her own life. His father, Gorou, had been the one to actually save him.

He was alive now because of their love.

At the same time, Genta had raised him even while holding such a dark secret.

That was also love.

It was the same with Osayo. She had probably noticed much earlier on that Yasohachi wasn't her real brother, but she had still supported him.

That was nothing but love.

Yasohachi felt himself foolish for thinking for even a moment that there was no place for him.

He was incredibly blessed to have so much love. He had lived his whole life without even thinking about that.

This incident had made him realize it.

Ukikumo had said then that he wouldn't be able to return to the place where he had been, but the place he was now was much more pleasant.

'Actually, I came here today because there was something I wanted you to look at.'

Yasohachi gave the painting he brought to Ukikumo.

Genta had given Yasohachi permission to aim to be an artist after the incident. If he was going to do it, he would have to aim to be the best in every kingdom – that was what he'd said.

Yasohachi had thought that Genta didn't want Yasohachi to be a painter because then he would go mad like Gorou, but it seemed that wasn't the case.

Genta had thought that if Yasohachi became a painter, he would have to go far away.

Osayo had told Yasohachi that.

'Oh, looks like you've improved a bit. There's a bit of feeling in here.'

Ukikumo looked at the painting with his chin in his hand.

'Really?'

'But you've still got a ways to go.'

Ukikumo thrust the painting back towards Yasohachi.'

'I'll be diligent. This painting is for you.'

'I don't need it.'

'What?'

'This is a painting you should keep.'

After saying that, Ukikumo smiled brightly.

Perhaps he was right.

Yasohachi had painted a woman holding a child.

In short, a portrait of a mother –

Chapter 2. THE WAY OF LOVE



恋慕の理

-

prologue

-

It was night –

Clouds hid the moon, and a small light floated in the inky darkness.

It was the light of Yasohachi's lantern.

– It's late.

Yasohachi walked the footpath by the Tamagawa Aqueduct.

He had gone to deliver fabrics to a client, and before he'd noticed, dark had fallen.

Ever since the trouble with the ghost, his father, Genta, didn't want to send Yasohachi's older sister, Osayo, on errands, so Yasohachi got sent around instead.

Though he was being used as a gofer, he was allowed to paint in his free time, so he couldn't complain.

Yasohachi had just laughed self-deprecatingly to himself when he suddenly stopped.

Even though it was the middle of summer, he had an unpleasant feeling that gave his spine chills.

In front of him, there was a weeping willow that probably spanned two ken[1]. The branches jutting out over the river shook in the night wind.

Willows by water were always unsettling.

Their unique hanging branches probably elicited that feeling.

Perhaps Yasohachi's chill from earlier had been caused by this weeping willow.

Yasohachi was about to start walking again, but somebody suddenly appeared from the shadow of the willow to block his way.

'Aaahh!'

A hysteric scream escaped Yasohachi's lips in his shock, and he fell onto his behind.

It was a woman, probably about twenty years old. She wore an indigo kimono which seemed to melt into the night. Though she was slender and had a face that looked docile, the red of her lips alone was strangely alluring.

The woman paid no attention to Yasohachi and walked away with lithe steps.

It was careless for a woman to walk alone at this time of night, especially without a lantern. As that thought came to Yasohachi, he tried to stand, but he suddenly found a kanzashi[2] at his feet.

He lit it with his lantern.

It was a silver hirauchi kanzashi, a flat round ornament with two prongs attached.

Perhaps the woman earlier had dropped it. Yasohachi picked up the kanzashi, stood and went after the woman.

'Hello – '

The woman didn't seem to hear Yasohachi's call as she kept walking away.

'Excuse me – you dropped this.'

Yasohachi called out once again, but the woman still did not stop. She disappeared around a corner.

Yasohachi jogged after her and turned the same corner.

Perhaps the woman had noticed him, as she had stopped. She stood in front of the back gate to a samurai residence.

'Excuse me...'

When Yasohachi spoke up, the woman turned around with a faint smile. It was a smile filled with a dark emotion that made him shudder.

Then, the woman went through the samurai residence's back gate.

'Eh?'

Yasohachi's eyes went wide in surprise. He hurriedly ran up to the door.

The woman had definitely gone through the gate. If she was a servant at this residence, it wouldn't be suspicious for her to go inside. However, the problem was that the woman had gone through without even opening the gate.

It was as if she had slipped through like the gate had not been there at all.

'Could it be...'

A thought suddenly came to Yasohachi's head.

– Was that woman a ghost?

Yasohachi became frightened the moment he thought that.

Perhaps it would be better to leave at once – is what he thought when he felt a presence behind him.

A sharp, pointed presence that could be taken as a killing intent –

When he turned around, he saw someone behind him. At first, he thought it was the woman from earlier, but he was wrong. The person was smaller framed and more slender.

While he was thinking, he heard a short. 'Ei!'

Yasohachi stepped back in surprise as a wooden sword sliced the air in front of him.

'Eek!'

Yasohachi dropped his lantern without thinking.

The lantern that had fallen to the floor started crackling as it burnt. The light lit the shadow standing in front of him.

A girl with her long hair tied behind her –

She was probably about the same age as Yasohachi. Her lips were thin and her big eyes looked straight at Yasohachi.

Though she had a small frame, she handled the wooden sword like a master.

That said, she did not seem rough. She was as lovely as a water lily.

'How beautiful...' said Yasohachi without thinking. At the same time, the tip of the wooden sword was thrust to his chin.

'Are you the vengeful spirit[3] targeting my older brother?'

The girl's voice was as beautiful as her looks.

'Vengeful spirit? What are you talking about?'

'Don't play dumb.'

The girl pressed the wooden sword into his skin.

'I really don't know what you're talking about. I'm just...'

'Don't waste your breath.'

The girl raised the wooden sword.

Even if it was wooden, Yasohachi wouldn't get away unscathed if he let it hit him.

I need to run – that was what he thought, but his body didn't move.

'Aaagh!'

Just as the girl was about to strike, there was a scream from the residence.

'Brother!' shouted the girl. She turned on her heels, opened the back gate and ran in.

Though Yasohachi could have used this chance to flee, before he'd noticed it, he had run in after the girl –

He went through the gate into the residence and saw a young man trembling in fear by the garden.

The man was looking at the woman who had been under the willow earlier.

Standing by the pond, he had a bewitching and mysterious smile on her face.

'Is it you!?'

The girl readied her sword and headed for the woman with flowing steps.

'You mustn't!'

Yasohachi tried to stop her, but she didn't make it in time.

'Yah!' the girl cried out as she tried to strike the woman. However, her blade went straight through her.

The woman's scornful laughter reverberated through all of them as she disappeared, melting into the darkness –

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1

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'So then you fell for that lass, Hachi – '

The man sitting in front of Yasohachi was nodding, his chin in his hands.

They were within an old, lopsided shrine building.

The man wasn't the monk at the shrine. He had just decided to stay here at this abandoned shrine on his own.

His name was Ukikumo. He wore his white kimono in a slapdash manner, red obi tied around him sloppily. His skin was as white as his kimono, his lips alone a startling red.

What stood out the most was his two eyes.

They were a vivid red that made one think of blood.

That wasn't all. Those red eyes could see the spirits of the dead – that is, ghosts.

Yasohachi's sister, Osayo, had been possessed by a ghost before. Hijikata, a seller of medicine, had introduced Yasohachi to an exorcist, and Yasohachi had met Ukikumo here at this shrine.

To be honest, he had doubted Ukikumo at first, since he had seemed incredibly suspicious.

However, Ukikumo, with his red eyes that saw the spirits of the dead, had not only revealed the truth of the incident but also exorcised the spirit.

'I didn't say anything about that,' denied Yasohachi.

Ukikumo poured sake from his gourd into the cup at his waist.

'What a boring man you are.'

'What do you mean?'

'You thought her beautiful, right?'

'Yes,' Yasohachi replied honestly.

From his first glance at the girl with the wooden sword, he had thought her beautiful. There was no doubting that.

'Then just romance her.'

'Why do you make that sound like the logical course of action? I don't know anything about her yet.'

Ukikumo sighed in exasperation upon hearing Yasohachi's words.

'You can find that out after taking her to bed.'

After saying that, Ukikumo gulped down the sake in his cup.

'That would be utterly shameless.'

'What's shameless about it? Are you an idiot? How could you know anything about her otherwise?' said Ukikumo, sounding dissatisfied. He wiped his mouth with his hand.

From Yasohachi's point of view, Ukikumo's logic made no sense. People fell in love first before being intimate. He just couldn't agree with being intimate with someone you didn't know well

'Hachi, could it be that you still don't know a woman's body?' Ukikumo said offhandedly.

Yasohachi let out an 'Urk' without thinking.

There was no 'could it be' about it. A woman's body? Yasohachi hadn't even held a woman's hand.

'Is there something wrong with that?' asked Yasohachi.

Ukikumo shook his head slightly.

'Don't you have any desire?'

'Desire?'

'The desire to take a good woman to bed.'

'What is a good woman? And wouldn't a passing moment of pleasure just leave you feeling empty?'

'Don't give a lecture when you don't know anything.'

Ukikumo poked Yasohachi in the head.

'There are things one knows because one doesn't know.'

'Rather than naïve, you're just an idiot.'

'Why am I an idiot?'

'Explaining aloud won't get anything started. Come on. Let's go,' declared Ukikumo as he stood up.

Ukikumo's tall figure was bewitching even to Yasohachi, who was of the same sex as him.

'To where?' asked Yasohachi as he stood up as well.

'The red-light district, of course.'

'R-red-light district? Why would we go there?'

Ukikumo grabbed Yasohachi's kimono and pulled him towards him to whisper in his ear. 'I'll teach you about women, Hachi.'

'W-women...? I, er...'

'Scared?'

Ukikumo's red eyes stared at Yasohachi.

To be honest, he was. It wasn't that he didn't like women, but he was afraid of stepping into a realm he didn't know.

However, he hesitated to say that aloud.

'T-that isn't it... I don't have money anyway.'

'Don't worry about. No woman would be uncouth enough to take money from me,' said Ukikumo, licking his lips.

Yasohachi was afraid. It felt like something inside him would change if he nodded here. And –

'Please wait. I didn't come here to talk about women.'

Yasohachi pulled himself away from Ukikumo.

He had almost been washed away by the pace of the conversation and forgotten his original goal.

'At this rate, you'll never lose your virginity,' said Ukikumo with a sigh as he sat down cross-legged once more.

'I said, I'm not talking about that.'

'Then what are you talking about?'

Ukikumo looked up at Yasohachi –

Ukikumo's gaze was cold enough to make Yasohachi shudder.

Yasohachi swallowed once before kneeling opposite Ukikumo. He took a deep breath to calm himself down before talking.

'I'm talking about the ghost that appeared at the samurai residence – '

'Ghost.'

'Yes,' said Yasohachi with a nod before continuing. 'After that, I heard the situation from Iori-san – '

'Is Iori the lass with the wooden sword?'

'Yes, she is,' said Yasohachi with a nod.

Iori was the daughter of the samurai family Hagiwara.

After the ghost disappeared, Iori had apologized to him.

Though Yasohachi could have left then, he couldn't leave the matter alone and asked about the incident himself.

At first, Iori had been hesitant, but perhaps she felt guilty about suspecting Yasohachi as she invited him in and explained the situation.

'The ghost had started to appear at the Hagiwara household about ten days ago.'

The first to see her was a man named Shintani Naosuke who had been staying at the Hagiwara household as a guest.

He was the man who had been trembling in the garden the night before. Servants also started to see the ghost frequently afterwards.

'If it's just a ghost showing up, you could let it alone, right?'

Ukikumo poured himself a cup of sake in disinterest and gulped it down.

It was mysterious how Ukikumo's skin, which was so pale, never changed colour no matter how much he drank.

'The problem is – that she wasn't just showing up.'

'Oh?'

'It seems that every time that ghost appears, she goes to the room of Iori-san's older brother, Shintarou.'

'Is that ghost a good woman?' said Ukikumo, licking his red lips.

'Well, I think she's beautiful.'

'An enviable man then.'

'Why would you say that?'

'A beautiful ghost is paying him night visits – that makes him a lucky man, right?'

For Ukikumo to feel desire even to a dead woman, he must be a considerable lecher. Yasohachi couldn't retort to each thing he said.

After clearing his throat, Yasohachi continued.

'It seems that ever since the ghost appeared, Shintarou-san has been sleeping on the floor.'

'Wore himself out, eh?'

'That's not it! According to lori-san, he's been sleeping this whole time – '

'Sleeping this whole time?'

'Yes. Well, Shintarou-san had never been a strong man and often went to see the doctor, but to keep sleeping like this – it's strange. It appears to be the ghost's doing.'

lori had been waiting for the ghost with a wooden sword in hand at the gate in order to save her brother, Shintarou.

Then, Yasohachi had appeared, and the incident followed.

'What a boring story.'

Ukikumo yawned and then lay down, using his arms as a pillow.

'For the Hagiwara family, it is a big problem. It seems that there were talks of marriage for Shintarou-san, but that will be called off if he keeps sleeping. Furthermore, tasteless rumours may spread...'

'In any case, Hachi, it's got nothing to do with you, right? And of course it's the same for me,' said Ukikumo, who then closed his eyes. It looked like he planned on going to sleep, but Yasohachi wouldn't accept that.

'Ukikumo-san, I would like you to expel the spirit.'

'I don't want to,' said Ukikumo, his eyes still closed.

'Please don't say that. I've already promised lori-san.'

'Hm?'

Ukikumo opened his eyes, looking incredibly annoyed.

Yasohachi hadn't been able to leave lori alone when he saw how grieved she looked, so he had ended up saying, 'I will introduce you to an exorcist.'

Now that he'd said it, he couldn't take it back.

'Please. If it goes well, there should be a considerable reward.'

Yasohachi bowed his head, which made Ukikumo sigh in a melodramatic manner.

'I hate samurai families.'

'Please don't say that...'

'Honestly. Not only are you an idiot, you're also meddlesome.'

Putting aside the idiot part, his older sister, Osayo, often called him meddlesome.

'I know that, but I can't leave the matter alone.'

'I don't mind going, but I have a condition.'

'What is it?' asked Yasohachi.

Ukikumo slowly stood up.

'Let me meet Osayo.'

'My sister?'

'If you don't like it, I'm not going.'

To tell the truth, Yasohachi didn't like it. From the earlier conversation they'd had, Yasohachi could easily imagine why Ukikumo wanted to meet Osayo.

That said, if Yasohachi refused here, Ukikumo really wouldn't do anything. Yasohachi wouldn't be able to face Iori then.

'What'll you do?'

Ukikumo's red eyes pressed Yasohachi for an answer –

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2

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Yasohachi stood under the same willow tree he had the night before –

It was mysterious. Though the willow had seemed so uncanny when he saw it at night, it seemed elegant in the day with the burbling of the stream.

'It's splendid,' murmured Ukikumo, standing beside Yasohachi and looking up at the willow.

Though he wore his usual casual white outfit, he was using his staff and covering his eyes with a red cloth.

Ukikumo covered his eyes with the red cloth like to pretend to be blind in front of other people.

His red eyes were beautiful, so Yasohachi thought there was no need to hide them, but it seemed there were many people in this world he didn't think the same way – according to Ukikumo.

'Willows often have ghosts about them, but is there some sort of power to the willow that causes that?' asked Yasohachi.

Ukikumo looked his way. There were eyes drawn in ink on the red cloth he wore. Though they were only drawings, they seemed an unnatural force to them.

'It's not the willows that've got ghosts.'

'What do you mean?'

Yasohachi had seen many paintings of ghosts before. Willows were often painted with the ghosts. It wasn't just in paintings – ghosts often appeared below willow trees in ghost stories as well.

'It's the water.'

Ukikumo pointed at the river with his staff.

'Water?'

'Yes. People's souls gather near whether they're alive or dead.'

'Is that so?'

'It is. And willows grow by water. That's the reason behind it.'

Yasohachi understood now.

'Then the ghost I saw last night was drawn to the water too?' asked Yasohachi.

Ukikumo looked at the willow again.

'I don't know.'

'But you just...'

'I just meant that's often the case. Saying that's always true would make it impossible to see what's really important.'

As Ukikumo said that, he put his staff on his shoulder.

'Is that how it is? '

'That's how it is. So where'd you pick up the kanzashi?'

'Around there.'

Yasohachi pointed at the roots of the willow after thinking about the events of last night.

Weeds grew wild. Yasohachi probably wouldn't have noticed the kanzashi there if he hadn't fallen.

'Show me that kanzashi once more.'

'Here.'

Yasohachi handed over the kanzashi to Ukikumo.

Ukikumo pushed up just the left side of the cloth covering his eyes and looked carefully at the kanzashi.

'It's pretty scratched up.'

'It is.'

Yasohachi hadn't noticed in the dark, but under the sunlight, he could tell there were scratches all over.

'I'll take this for a bit.'

Ukikumo put the kanzashi into his kimono without waiting for Yasohachi's answer.

Yasohachi had no objections. Keeping it himself wouldn't be of any use.

'Did you figure something out?' asked Yasohachi.

Ukikumo snorted. 'Don't rush for an answer.'

'I know, but...'

'So that ghost kept walking without responding to your call then, Hachi?'

'Yes.'

When Yasohachi responded, Ukikumo started walking towards the Hagiwara household.

'Where did that ghost come from?' asked Yasohachi as he followed Ukikumo.

'What do you mean?'

'It suddenly appeared under the willow tree, but I thought that maybe it was somewhere else before – '

'Who knows,' said Ukikumo with a shrug.

However, Yasohachi felt like Ukikumo knew the answer, despite his words.

Upon reaching the Hagiwara household back gate, Yasohachi said, 'Er, there's one more thing I want to ask, but...'

Ukikumo stopped and turned around.

It had been on Yasohachi's mind since yesterday. The question was –

'Why were we able to see the ghost too last night?'

Yasohachi was confused by that.

Ukikumo, with his red eyes, could always see ghosts. However, Yasohachi, without them, could not usually see ghosts.

However, sometimes he would suddenly be able to. Furthermore, yesterday, three people including Yasohachi had seen the same ghost.

Why were they able to see ghosts at some times but not at other times?

'I don't know for sure either.'

Since Yasohachi had been hoping for a clear answer, to be honest, he was disappointed by Ukikumo's response.

'Why? Don't you have eyes that can see ghosts?'

'That's why.'

'Eh?'

'My eyes can always see ghosts.'

Ukikumo lightly touched the red cloth with his fingers.

Now that Ukikumo said that, Yasohachi understood. Just as Yasohachi didn't know the world that Ukikumo saw, Ukikumo did not know the world Yasohachi saw.

Ukikumo smiled bitterly. It felt a bit sad.

Perhaps Yasohachi's words had hurt Ukikumo in some way.

'I'm sorry,' said Yasohachi, which made Ukikumo furrow his brows.

'Why are you apologising?'

'I don't have an answer, but I just felt like I should...'

'It's pointless concern. I...'

The back gate to the Hagiwara household opened, interrupting Ukikumo.

Iori appeared from inside.

'So it really was you, Yasohachi-dono,' said Iori in a clear voice.

Yasohachi had thought that Iori was like a water lily when he saw her in the night, but under the sun, she was as bright as a sunflower.

In either case, it did not change the fact that she was beautiful.

'Iori-san, how did you know it was me?'

'I heard voices, so I thought that perhaps...'

Iori glanced at Ukikumo.

'This is the exorcist that I mentioned last night. His name is Ukikumo-san.'

After Yasohachi introduced Ukikumo, Iori politely bowed from her waist. 'Thank you for coming.'

Ukikumo responded with a cool 'Hm'.

'Please come in.'

After saying that, Iori went inside.

Yasohachi was about to go in when Ukikumo grabbed his shoulder.

'What is it?'

Ukikumo put his face close to Yasohachi's. 'Hachi, that woman's a bad idea.'

'What are you talking about?'

'That woman's trouble.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, you'll find out soon enough.'

Ukikumo smiled in a meaningful way.

What on earth did he mean? Yasohachi was about to question him, but Iori asked 'What's the matter?' and the conversation was interrupted.

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3

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Yasohachi sat next to Ukikumo –

They were in the Hagiwara guest room.

In complete contrast to Yasohachi, who was kneeling properly with his spine completely straight, Ukikumo had his staff under his arm and was sitting cross-legged – he even looked relaxed.

Two other men were sitting in the guest room.

Yasohachi had met one of them last night. Shintani Naosuke, a guest of the Hagiwara family.

He was probably about halfway through his twenties. He looked good sitting in his hakama, different from his frightened appearance last night. Furthermore, looking at him properly, he appeared to be quite a lady-killer.

The other was Iori's father and the master of the Hagiwara household, Hagiwara Shounosuke.

He had a round face like Iori, but his eyes were thin and droopy and he had a large, round nose, which gave him a warm atmosphere.

He did not find fault with Ukikumo's incredibly ill-mannered behavior either.

'Is this gentleman the exorcist?' asked Shounosuke, looking at Ukikumo.

Ukikumo's eyes were covered with a red cloth that had eyes drawn on it. Even as Shounosuke looked at this strange appearance, his smile did not leave his face.

'Well, something like it,' replied Ukikumo. He poured sake from the gourd he had brought with him into the cup at his waist and gulped it down.

'That's disrespectful!'

Naosuke half-got up but unexpectedly Shounosuke was the one to stop him.

'Isn't he an interesting fellow?'

'But...'

'Shintani-dono, if you are a samurai, you should also show your broadmindedness. Otherwise, I will not accept your betrothal to Iori.'

Shounosuke's words calmed the situation. In contrast, Yasohachi's heart was unsettled. It seemed Naosuke was Iori's betrothed.

'You're a good man for a samurai.'

Ukikumo poured sake into his cup and held it out towards Shounosuke.

Shounosuke smiled slightly and took the cup, downing it in one go.

'So, Ukikumo-dono, did you undergo your training somewhere?' asked Shounosuke as he returned the cup.

'No, unfortunately, I don't believe in gods or Buddha.'

'How can you expel spirits like that!?'

Naosuke flared up again.

However, Ukikumo wouldn't falter at something like that.

'Don't decide things in that petty mind of yours.'

'What did you say?'

'I can see things you can't –'

After saying that, Ukikumo touched the red cloth with eyes on it with his finger.

'Talking big for a blind man.'

'You'll get in trouble if you leap forward just based on appearances.'

'Now, let's calm down.'

Shounosuke calmed the situation once more.

Ukikumo was calm, but Yasohachi felt nervous just watching. He was covered in a cold sweat.

'So Shintarou is really possessed by something?' asked Shounosuke after a pause, bringing the conversation back on topic.

'I don't know. I haven't seen him yet. I'll make a decision after that.'

When Ukikumo said that, Shounosuke looked a bit surprised.

'Then it might not be a possession?'

'Yeah, might just be an illness. I won't be able to do anything then, so get a doctor instead.'

'A doctor...'

'And my specialty is ghosts. If it's some other form of spirit, I won't be able to do much, so you'll need to find someone else.'

Ukikumo's words made Shounosuke laugh aloud.

What was so funny? Yasohachi looked at Ukikumo. Ukikumo was frowning; it seemed like he didn't understand why Shounosuke was laughing either.

'Ah, I apologise. You see, ever since Shintarou became as he is now, many people calling themselves exorcists who must have heard rumours have been coming here.'

'Is that so?' asked Yasohachi.

Shounosuke nodded.

'All of them would ask things like "What did the evil spirit do?" and "What about that demon?", speaking intimidating words before even seeing Shintarou. In short, they were trying to sell sutras or other things. It appears you are, unlike them, an honest person.'

'That's my only good quality,' Ukikumo said shamelessly.

Yasohachi, who had had the money stolen from his wallet, was doubtful about Ukikumo's honesty, but it seemed Shounosuke liked him.

'Please allow me to leave Shintarou in your care.'

Shounosuke bowed his head deeply.

'I'll do what I can. I need to see him first.'

After Ukikumo repeated himself, Shounosuke called Iori to the room and told her to show them to where Shintarou was.

With Iori as their guide, Yasohachi and Ukikumo headed for Shintarou's room.

'A doctor is currently here,' said Iori as she walked.

Shintarou's room was at a corner which had a view of the garden.

'This is the one,' said Iori, opening the sliding door.

'Eek!'

A little shriek came from the room.

The one who had spoken was a man in a jittoku[4]. He was probably the doctor.

'I apologise for surprising you.'

Iori bowed her head.

'No, not at all. Who might these people be?'

The doctor looked at Yasohachi and Ukikumo.

'These gentlemen are Yasohachi-dono and Ukikumo-dono.'

Iori gave a brief introduction.

She had probably refrained from mentioning that Ukikumo was an exorcist since she was in front of a doctor.

'My name is Koishikawa Souten.'

The man who had called himself Koishikawa bowed his head politely.

He was fairly young for a doctor. He had a pale face and seemed somewhat unreliable.

Koishikawa seemed suspicious of Ukikumo's strange appearance, but he didn't say anything.

Once things settled down, Yasohachi looked at Shintarou, who slept in his futon.

His round face and lips were similar to Iori's.

His face as he slept was so withered away it was unfortunate.

Koishikawa examined Shintarou, checking his pulse and listening to his heartbeat in a manner that suggested he was very accustomed to doing so.

Yasohachi knelt by Shintarou's futon beside Iori and watched Koishikawa.

Then, he saw Ukikumo leaning against a pillar.

He seemed to be in thought, with his hand on his chin.

'How is my brother's condition?' asked Iori, leaning forward, once Koishikawa was done with his examination.

'I cannot say anything since I don't know the cause,' replied Koishikawa with a small shake of his head.

Yasohachi felt like Iori's dignified expression grew immediately darker.

'Is it the work of a ghost then?' murmured Iori to herself.

'A ghost... That's impossible,' Koishikawa denied resolutely.

Ukikumo's expression stiffened slightly.

'How can you say it's impossible?' asked Ukikumo, which made Koishikawa look up.

'I don't believe in ghosts. I don't know the cause, but it is some sort of illness. Prayers and exorcisms will not heal him,' Koishikawa said firmly. They were very much the words of a doctor.

'What proof do you have to say they don't exist?' asked Ukikumo, looking angry.

Koishikawa froze for a moment, perhaps afraid of the eyes drawn on the red cloth. However, he soon smiled slightly afterwards.

'I have never seen a ghost in my entire life.'

'You've never seen one, so they don't exist – is that what you want to say?'

'Yes.'

'Then let me ask this. Do you think Oda Nobunaga existed?'

'Well, yes,' replied Koishikawa, seeming suspicious.

'Why? Have you seen Oda Nobunaga before?'

'No, I haven't.'

'You've never seen him, so isn't it strange for you to say he existed?'

'That's just quibbling.'

'What's quibbling about it? You said just now that you don't believe in something because you've never seen it.'

'That's different. And aren't there documents left behind which serve as signs that Oda Nobunaga existed?'

'Ghosts leave documents behind too, don't they?'

'That's just more quibbling.'

'OK. There are tons of things in this world that you don't know. But, they exist whether you know about them or not. Got it?'

With a dubious smile on his face, Ukikumo put his sake gourd straight to his lips and took a gulp.

Koishikawa seemed to think that any further discussion would be pointless as he just smiled wryly and then swiftly took out five paper backs from a box and placed them on the tray by Shintarou's pillow.

'Please give him one bag of medicine with water a day, just as you have done up until now,' said Koishikawa.

'Yes,' responded Iori with a nod.

'Please excuse me.'

Koishikawa bowed his head politely and left the room.

'What a quack!' said Ukikumo very audibly right afterwards.

Ukikumo, who could see ghosts, probably hadn't liked having their existence outright denied.

'How is he then?' asked Yasohachi.

Ukikumo sat cross-legged by Shintarou's pillow.

'Is something malevolent possessing him?' asked Iori anxiously.

'I don't know yet. More importantly, how long's this man been sleeping?'

'It's been seven days,' replied Iori.

'Was there any sign of this beforehand?'

'He appeared to have caught a cold, but that was all,' replied Iori, which made Ukikumo cross his arms and make a 'Hm' sound.

Yasohachi didn't know what he was thinking. There was no way for him to – the worlds they saw were different.

Unable to bear with the silence, Yasohachi asked, 'What will you do?'

'I'm staying here tonight – you don't mind, right?' said Ukikumo.

Iori gave him a big nod in response –

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4

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'The moon looks good tonight.'

Ukikumo, sitting by Shintarou's pillow, spoke in a carefree manner as he poured sake from a bottle into a cup.

A female servant had brought it earlier.

It was true that the moon was beautiful, shining brightly unlike yesterday, when it had been hidden by the clouds. However, that wasn't the problem.

'Could you guard a bit more seriously?'

Ukikumo didn't seem anxious at all. This was just drinking sake while viewing the moon. Furthermore, he was doing this at the bedside of Shintarou, who was sleeping, unable to wake up. It was just too imprudent.

Ukikumo snorted and finished the sake in his cup in one gulp.

'I'm incredibly serious.'

'It doesn't look that way.'

Drinking sake didn't seem serious at all.

'You telling me to learn from that lass?'

Ukikumo looked at the garden.

Iori, in hakama, was waving her sword about with intense concentration. She was probably preparing for the ghost's attack.

Her form was beautiful. It was beautiful, but something felt off to Yasohachi.

He couldn't express it well, but if he had to say, it seemed that the bright spark that Iori had already had was being forced out.

'Come to think of it, you told me to give up on her.'

Ukikumo had said that when they were going through the Hagiwara gate. Though Ukikumo had said that Yasohachi would understand soon enough, Yasohachi still didn't understand what he had meant.

'What, so you really did fall for her?' said Ukikumo mockingly.

'That isn't it. I'm just curious since you said something like that.'

'Hachi, can't you tell just by looking?'

'I can't,' Yasohachi said firmly.

Ukikumo shook his head with an exasperated sigh.

'That's an innocent young woman who doesn't know men.'

It was so sudden that it took some time for Yasohachi to understand what Ukikumo meant.

'H-how can you tell?'

'You can tell just from looking, right?'

'I can't!'

Perhaps because of Yasohachi's loud voice, Iori stopped and turned to look at them.

When their gazes met, all Yasohachi could do was respond with a twitching smile. Iori seemed suspicious for a while, but then she started to wave her sword again.

'Honestly, Ukikumo-san, it's your fault for saying something so strange all of a sudden,' protested Yasohachi with a sigh.

However, Ukikumo didn't care at all.

'What's so strange about it? This is important.'

'Why is it?'

'I'm saying that taking a maiden as your partner is a heavy burden.'

'I said I don't see Iori-san that way. And Iori-san is going to marry Shintani-san anyway. She lives in a different world from a townsman like me.'

Yasohachi's words made Ukikumo smile.

'You're the one deciding that you're living in different worlds, aren't you?'

'I'm not deciding anything. We really do come from different ranks.'

No matter what Ukikumo said, a marriage between someone from a samurai family and someone from the common folk would not be accepted. That was the difference between rank.

'Rank doesn't exist in the bedroom. You're just a man and a woman.'

Yasohachi could understand Ukikumo's logic, but –

He was about to object when Naosuke walked down the corridor.

'What do you want?' asked Ukikumo with a sigh.

'Nothing. Just...'

Naosuke paused.

'You can't trust me, right?' said Ukikumo in Naosuke's stead.

Naosuke didn't respond, just looking at Iori who was waving her sword fervently.

Though Naosuke probably couldn't trust Ukikumo, he was probably also here because he was anxious about Iori.

'Hachi,' muttered Ukikumo.

'Yes?'

'If it hurts, you can cry.'

What on earth was he talking about? Yasohachi was about to ask, but he couldn't, because it was clear that Ukikumo had sensed something from his hard expression.

'You've come then – ' murmured Ukikumo in a low voice. He stood with his staff.

'Who has?'

'The host.'

After saying that, Ukikumo pointed at the back gate.

Yasohachi looked in that direction while holding his breath.

A woman stood there.

She wore an indigo kimono that seemed like it would melt into the night. Though she had a pale face, there was a bewitching beauty to her. It was definitely the woman from last night.

Iori and Naosuke had noticed her as well and had turned their gazes that way.

A jolt of tension ran through the air.

The woman seemed to slide across the ground as she headed towards Shintarou's room.

'Stay away from my brother!'

Iori ran up to the woman to block her way and held her wooden sword up in front of her.

Still, the woman did not stop.

'Stay away!' shouted Iori as she struck.

However, the tip of her sword went right through the woman's body.

Iori sliced sideways and then diagonally, not giving up, but still her strikes kept going through the woman.

'It's useless. Give it up.'

Ukikumo went into the garden, still barefoot, and pushed Iori aside.

However, Iori still tried to strike the woman. Yasohachi grabbed Iori's hand and pulled her away.

'Let's leave this to Ukikumo-san,' said Yasohachi.

Iori bit her lower lip and looked down.

'Why are you wandering the world of the living?' asked Ukikumo, pulling up the left side of the red cloth covering his eyes just slightly. He was probably looking at the woman in a way that wouldn't let Iori and Naosuke see his eyes.

'I... lo...' said the woman, her voice trembling.

Yasohachi couldn't hear her, but he could tell that there was strong emotion in that voice.

'Just as I expected then – ' Ukikumo murmured.

He spoke as if he had known everything from the start.

'You... I'll cut you down!'

Naosuke, who had been frozen in fear earlier, seemed to have gained his resolve as he unsheathed his sword and tried to cut the woman.

The tip of his sword went right through the woman, as expected.

The woman sent Naosuke a glare and then melted into the darkness, just as she had done the night before –

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5

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Yasohachi went to the shrine that Ukikumo had made his stronghold the next day, past noon –

He was meant to have come earlier, but because of the late night, he had completely slept in.

'Hello!'

He called out as he stood in front of the shrine, but there was no response.

'Ukikumo-san, are you here?'

He called out once more and the shrine door opened.

Yasohachi was startled. It wasn't Ukikumo who had come out but a woman in a pale red kimono.

She was probably about halfway through her twenties. She had sharp looks, with a showy and beguiling beauty that made him hold his breath.

'You must be Yasohachi-san.'

The woman looked at Yasohachi with seductive eyes.

Though her voice seemed a bit low, it matched the woman in front of his eyes and was bewitching.

'Eh, ah, yes... Why do you know my name?'

'Do you want me to tell you?' said the woman teasingly, dragging a long, white finger along Yasohachi's cheek.

A smell that reminded him of plum flowers tickled his nose.

It was too much for Yasohachi. He couldn't speak. The woman saw Yasohachi in his predicament and gave him a full-lipped smile.

'You're blushing. How cute.'

'I-I, er...'

'Somebody like you shouldn't keep the company of a man like him,' whispered the woman in Yasohachi's ear.

Her breath felt ticklish.

'A man like him?'

'Well, it's fine. If you're looking for him, he's inside,' said the woman, turning around.

'Ah, yes,' responded Yasohachi.

The woman smiled faintly. 'I'll see you then –' She walked around with lithe steps.

– Is she Ukikumo's lover?

Yasohachi thought about that as he stepped inside.

'What, it's you, Hachi?'

Ukikumo said that as he stifled a yawn, sitting with his back against the wall.

He was only wearing his white kimono, leaving his firm chest exposed.

'Er... who was that woman earlier?'

Ukikumo pulled a wry face.

'Ah, Tamamo?'

'Tamamo-san – is that her name?'

'I don't know her real name. I just call her that.'

'You don't know...? Isn't she your lover?'

'Do you know why I call her Tamamo?' responded Ukikumo as he poured sake out from his gourd.

'I don't know.'

'It's from Tamamo-no-Mae.'

'Are you talking about that tale of a transforming nine-tailed fox spirit?'

Yasohachi had heard of the legend of Tamamo-no-Mae before.

Tamamo-no-Mae, who had been a woman of startling beauty, had been doted on by the emperor. However, her real form was that of the nine-tailed fox, a spirit that brought misfortune.

If Yasohachi remembered correctly, an onmyouji[5] named Abe-no-something or other had exorcised her spirit.

'That's right. Tamamo might give up her body but she'll never give up her heart. That's the sort of woman she is. If you carelessly make a move on her, she'll drag you to the pits of hell.'

'Huh.'

Yasohachi felt like he had been given the slip, but he couldn't worry about that now.

Yasohachi knelt in front of Ukikumo.

'What are you being so formal for now?' said Ukikumo as he drank his sake.

'What do you mean, what? It's about the Hagiwara household case.'

After the woman's ghost had disappeared last night, Ukikumo had quickly dressed himself and left the Hagiwara household.

The case hadn't been solved.

'Ah, that...'

Ukikumo's gaze wandered.

There was no way he had forgotten. It had been just yesterday. He had to be playing dumb.

'If nothing is done, Iori-san's brother will...'

'You don't have to worry about that,' Ukikumo said firmly.

'What do you mean?'

'You don't understand?'

'I don't.'

Ukikumo looked troubled.

'Honestly, why not try thinking on your own sometimes?'

Ukikumo's words irritated Yasohachi.

It wasn't like Yasohachi was slow. He had been thinking about that ghost ever since last night. However, he still didn't understand.

'I...'

Yasohachi was about to object when Ukikumo stopped him.

'Listen up. The ghost last night shows up at the Hagiwara household every night. Why do you think the ghost does that?'

'Isn't the ghost going to see Shintarou-san?'

'Well, that's near the mark.'

'Huh...'

'If that ghost is going to see Shintarou-san, do you know the reason?'

'The reason?'

'Yes. She's going to see him because she has a reason, right?'

Yasohachi understood what Ukikumo was saying, but there was another way to think about it.

'I think she might go even without a reason.'

'Oh? And in what situation would that be?'

Ukikumo's eyes narrowed. His red eyes seemed to glint.

'She might have fallen in love with Shintarou-san – '

When Yasohachi said that, Ukikumo smiled slightly.

'Going to meet the person she loves is a splendid reason, right?'

'Ah, I see...'

'If a woman's ghost is wandering because she fell in love – did she fall in love with Shintarou after dying? Or did she fall in love first and then die?'

'I think she fell in love first and then died.'

'Why do you think that?'

'I don't have any proof. I just think so.'

Ukikumo nodded.

'I think the same thing.'

If it wasn't just Yasohachi – if Ukikumo thought the same way – it made him think his current theory was correct. But if that was the case –

'That would make that ghost Shintarou-san's lover.'

'Well, there's that possibility.'

'But Shintarou-san was having talks of marriage...'

'Is that a marriage he desired?'

Ukikumo looked frightening as he said that.

'What do you mean?'

'The marriages of samurai families don't just spring up because two people are madly in love.'

It was just as Ukikumo said.

A samurai family couldn't decide which family to bind themselves to through marriage just by considering the feelings of the people getting married. It would have a great influence on their social status afterwards, so samurai marriages required the permission of the shogunate and the domain.

It was often the case that people were forced to separate from the ones they had fallen in love with in order to marry partners they did not desire. However –

'Then that woman's ghost wasn't Shintarou-san's lover?'

'The relationship between a man and a woman cannot be explained with logic.'

There were talks of marriage, but he had another woman – that was probably what Ukikumo wanted to say.

'Well, maybe that was the case.'

'Then the question is why that woman died.'

Ukikumo's words seemed to have subtext to them. His narrowed red eyes gleamed coldly.

'What are you trying to say?'

'That ghost was probably a woman from the red-light district. She had probably been troublesome for Shintarou, who was going to get married – '

Another sentence full of subtext.

Though Ukikumo hadn't said it aloud, it seemed he was suggesting that Shintarou had killed the woman from the red-light district in order to cut his ties with her. However –

'There are men who visit the red-light district even after marriage. Even men with mistresses...'

'I don't think the Hagiwara household would have been able to do that. Paying to get a woman in the red-light district out of bondage to make her a mistress costs money.'

That was true. Yasohachi had heard that it cost a lot of money to buy somebody out of bondage. Furthermore, it would be necessary to set up a separate house and to pay for her living expenses.

It would be especially hard now that the power of samurai families had dwindled.

'But then he could have just left her – '

'Maybe their break up turned sour or he didn't want to leave her...'

'Then he should have just married the woman he loved...'

'This is why I call you an idiot. What if the marriage would be beneficial to his own status? There are people who could throw away their feelings of love if it was for their own profit.'

It was true that there were probably people like that.

However, even though Yasohachi had only seen Shintarou in his sleep, the man just didn't seem like that sort of person.

Especially not the sort of person who would kill for that reason –

'Well, anyway, I'm having Tamamo investigate who that ghost is,' said Ukikumo after a pause.

'How will she investigate?'

'For things about the red-light district, it's best to ask a woman from there.'

So Tamamo was a prostitute from the red-light district then. When Yasohachi remembered that mellow fragrance, he understood, but at the same time, a question came to him.

A prostitute from the red-light district would never be allowed out alone. Yasohachi wanted to ask about that, but Ukikumo spoke before he could.

'I want you to investigate another matter.'

'Another matter?'

Yasohachi had a bad feeling even as he spoke.

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6

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'Hello – '

Yasohachi called out to Iori, who was fervently brandishing her wooden sword. Yasohachi had been led to the porch by a female servant of the Hagiwara household.

Iori stopped waving her sword and turned to look at Yasohachi.

Yasohachi returned a stiff smile upon seeing her tense expression.

Though Iori looked elegant and beautiful as she held her wooden sword, she gave off an air that made it hard to approach her.

'Yasohachi-dono – did you discover anything new?'

Iori wiped the sweat off her forehead with a hand towel and walked towards him.

'No, not yet...'

'I see,' said Iori, looking away as she sat on the porch.

'Ukikumo-san said it would be all right though.'

Even as Yasohachi knew those were just words of comfort, he sat next to Iori.

'I'll believe those words.'

This time, with Iori's strong gaze on him, Yasohachi was the one to look away.

For a while, the silence continued. Nothing would begin if they were both silent. Yasohachi had come here with a goal.

'Actually,' he said, 'there's something I want to ask you, Iori-san.'

'Me?'

Iori cocked her head.

'It's about your older brother, Shintarou-san.'

'What is it?'

'What sort of person is he?'

As Yasohachi asked that, he looked towards Shintarou's room.

The door was closed now so he couldn't see him. Though Yasohachi's impression of Shintarou was only of his sleeping figure, he seemed like his father, Shounosuke – a gentle person.

'He is kind. Very. But...'

Iori's expression clouded over slightly.

'But – what is it?'

'He is too kind. Even when he practises swordsmanship, he lets himself be hit because he doesn't want to hurt others.'

'Isn't that a good thing?'

'It is unacceptable for the heir of a samurai family. Sometimes, it will be necessary for him to behave in a stricter manner.'

Yasohachi, the son of a dry-goods shop owner, had no way to fathom it, but just as Iori said, it was probably necessary to act in a certain manner if born into a samurai family.

Iori bit her lip with force. It felt like she was holding something back. A question came to Yasohachi as he looked at her.

'Iori-san, why do you practise the sword?' he asked.

Iori glared at him.

'Even though you're a girl... That's what you want to say, right?'

'That isn't it. I don't believe that woman shouldn't practise swordsmanship.'

'Then...'

'I just thought that it would be very sad if you do so because you are in a samurai family or in your brother's stead.'

'Sad?'

Iori cocked her head like she didn't understand.

'Yes. Currently, I aim to be a painter.'

'A painter.'

'Yes. But just a little bit earlier, I had thought that I would have to take over the shop, since I'm the son of a dry-goods shop owner. However, living that way is a little strange in my opinion.'

'Why do you think so?'

'Whether it is birth or family, don't you think it is sad to be bound?'

'Yasohachi-san, you're a strange person,' said Iori. She was looking down, but she had a faint smile on her face.

It might have been the first time Yasohachi had seen her smile. The expression made something within him feel warm.

'Am I strange?'

'Yes, you are.'

Iori nodded. When she said it so firmly, he had nothing to respond.

For a while, they were both silent, but then Iori stood up and said, 'Because I like it – '

'Eh?'

'I practise swordsmanship because I like it. It's not that I want to cut anyone done. I just find that my heart feels at ease when I wave the sword.'

After saying that, Iori held her wooden sword up in front of her.

The air about Iori changed immediately. She really was beautiful.

'Is that so? That makes me glad.'

'Yes.'

'Would you allow me to ask one more thing?' asked Yasohachi.

Iori nodded and put down her sword.

'There are talks of marriage for Shintarou-san, but who is to be his partner?'

'The daughter of the Nagai household, Tae-san.'

'It was decided by the parents then,' said Yasohachi, but Iori smiled bashfully.

'That isn't it.'

'It isn't?'

'It isn't. My brother and Tae-san are both childhood friends and in love. My father knew that when he talked to the Nagai household about marriage.'

'Is that so – '

It was an unexpected answer.

However, he might have just been prejudiced because of his conversation with Ukikumo.

'Though they did agree, the Nagai household is not very happy with the engagement.'

'Why is that?'

'To be honest, neither the Hagiwara household nor the Nagai household is that large. Tae-san is beautiful, so they probably believe they could marry her to a better family.'

'I see...'

Since the marriage of their daughter had direct connections to their advancement in society, it made sense that they were concerned. From the perspective of a townsman, the samurai families seemed to do whatever they wanted, but they had their own problems.

'They may end the talks of marriage if they hear of my brother's condition.'

Iori sighed. She was probably deeply concerned about Shintarou.

'I won't allow it.'

Yasohachi had spoken before he had realised it.

Yasohachi knew that he couldn't do anything. He didn't even know the situation. Still, he felt like he wanted to do something when he saw Iori's sad profile.

'That is of great comfort to me.'

Iori smiled slightly.

However, it was an awkward one. She could probably see that there was no evidence behind Yasohachi's words.

Yasohachi looked down in sudden embarrassment.

'Is that all you had to ask?' said Iori after a silence.

'Ah, no. Did Shintarou-san have anybody he cared for besides Tae-san?'

'No.'

An immediate answer.

'He might have had a secret relationship without anyone realizing.'

'My brother would never do that,' Iori said firmly.

Yasohachi wanted to believe those words, but sometimes people had sides to them that were unimaginable to others. He had learnt that from the previous case.

That said, pressing Iori further would probably be of no use.

'I see. Thank you very much.'

'Will doing this bring my brother to recovery?'

Yasohachi could understand why Iori was doubtful. Yasohachi himself was still half in doubt. That said, all he could do now was act with his belief in Ukikumo.

'Ukikumo-san will do something.'

'You trust him.'

Iori's words made Yasohachi think.

Ukikumo just drank sake all the time, and Yasohachi knew nothing of where he came from. He had even stolen money from Yasohachi and was a lecher on top of that.

To be honest, it would be hard to say he was somebody worth trusting, but still, Ukikumo was the only person he could rely on in this situation.

'I wonder about that,' Yasohachi replied vaguely. He stood up to thank Iori and leave, but then he remembered something.

'Excuse me. One more thing – '

'What is it?'

'When was your betrothal decided, Ukikumo-san?'

This was also something Ukikumo had told Yasohachi to ask.

'It isn't,' Iori replied firmly.

'But...'

Yesterday, when Yasohachi had come to the Hagiwara household, Iori's father, Shounosuke, had talked to Naosuke about the betrothal.

'That is just something Shintani-sama is talking about on his own.'

'Is that so?'

'I have no intentions of becoming a bride.'

'Is that because you dislike Shintani-san?'

'That isn't it. I just don't feel like it.'

Iori walked out of the garden, as if to escape.

Yasohachi couldn't discern the true meaning of her words from her retreating figure –

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'Yasohachi-san.'

As Yasohachi was heading for the shrine where Ukikumo was at, somebody called out to him.

Yasohachi turned around and called out, 'Hijikata-san.' Hijikata was jogging towards him.

Hijikata's soft features made him seem gentle at first glance, but there was always a sharp glint in the back of his almond eyes – he was an unfathomable man.

Though he was a seller of medicine, it felt like he was more suited to being a warrior.

'It seems you've wrapped yourself up in another supernatural case,' said Hijikata with a smile.

'How do you know that?'

'That man was grumbling about how "Hachi's gone and picked up something he didn't need to", see – ' said Hijikata, mimicking Ukikumo's voice.

It sounded so like it that Yasohachi burst out without thinking. 'That wasn't my intention...'

'It isn't anything to worry about. Expelling spirits is that man's calling, so he should be grateful to you, Yasohachi-san, for bringing work to him.'

'Hearing that makes me feel a bit better.'

'You are heading to see that man now then.'

'Yes,' responded Yasohachi, which made Hijikata take off the box of medicine he was carrying on his back and take out a piece of paper folded into a triangle.

'Please give this to that man.'

'What is it?'

'As you can see, it's medicine.'

'Huh...'

Was Ukikumo feeling unwell – Yasohachi thought about that as he took the bag of medicine.

'Also, please give him this message.'

'Hijikata-san, you aren't going yourself?'

'I have a bit of an urgent task to attend to.'

'I see...'

'It is as you imagined – would you please tell him that?'

'What does that mean?'

'You'll understand if you tell him,' said Hijikata with a smile. He put on the medicine box once more, turned around and walked away briskly.

He was as fast as if he was running – he disappeared from sight in no time at all.

– What a busy person.

Yasohachi started to head towards Ukikumo's shrine again.

He passed through the torii, went through the tall grass and stood in front of the shrine building. He thought about calling out, but Ukikumo spoke before he could. 'Come in.'

Yasohachi went inside and saw Ukikumo lying on the ground, staring at the hirauchi kanzashi.

'That's the one the ghost had, right?' said Yasohachi.

Ukikumo sat up lazily.

'To be more correct, this was what that woman dropped before becoming a ghost.'

'What's the difference?'

'Ghosts are clusters of human emotion. They can't hold things or break things. More importantly, you met that idiot Toshizou, right?'

'How do you know that?' said Yasohachi in surprise.

'You have a bag of medicine, right? I gave it to Toshizou.'

'Oh.'

That made sense, but another question came to Yasohachi.

'You gave it to him, Ukikumo-san?'

'I did.'

'Why?'

It was a bit strange to give medicine to Hijikata, who was a seller of it.

'I'll explain afterwards. More importantly, Toshizou told you something, right?'

'Ah, he asked me to tell you that it was as you imagined – '

Ukikumo put his chin in his hand. 'So that really is the case...'

What on earth was he thinking? Yasohachi thought about asking, but Ukikumo asked a question before he could.

'So how about your side of things?'

'About that...'

Yasohachi knelt in front of Ukikumo and told him in detail what he had heard from Iori.

Ukikumo gulped sake from his cup at times but listened to Yasohachi intently.

'I see. Most everything is clear to me now,' said Ukikumo once Yasohachi finished.

'What is clear to you?'

'The truth – maybe I'll say that.'

'Really?'

Yasohachi half-got up without thinking.

'Yeah.'

'Then you can expel that ghost.'

'There's something to do before then.'

'What is it?'

'Wake Shintarou up.'

Ukikumo's unexpected words made Yasohachi cock his head. 'Eh?'

'Wake Shintarou-san up before expelling the ghost?'

'That's right.'

'But Shintarou-san is, er... isn't he like that because the ghost is possessing him?'

When Yasohachi said that, Ukikumo looked straight at him with his red eyes and smiled confidently.

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'Er... We're going to wake up Shintarou-san then,' said Yasohachi to Ukikumo, who was walking beside him.

Ukikumo had his staff with him and the red cloth with eyes drawn on it on as he pretend to be a blind man as usual.

'We are,' Ukikumo replied calmly.

'If so, we're heading in the wrong direction. The Hagiwara household is that way.'

Yasohachi stopped to point, but Ukikumo just snorted.

'I know that.'

'Then...'

'If we're going to wake up Shintarou, this is the right direction,' said Ukikumo pointedly. He started walking forward briskly. If he had so much confidence, all Yasohachi could do was follow him.

Yasohachi walked along with Ukikumo to a small clinic.

'Why are we at a clinic?' asked Yasohachi.

'You'll understand soon,' said Ukikumo, going inside.

Yasohachi was confused, but he went inside after him.

'Ah!'

After going inside, he saw a face he recognized.

It was Koishikawa, the doctor who had examined Shintarou. He seemed surprised as well – his eyes darted back and forth between Yasohachi and Ukikumo.

'Is something the matter?' asked Koishikawa, seeming suspicious.

Ukikumo smirked.

'There's something I want to ask you.'

'What is it?'

'We can talk about it here, but it might not be a good idea.'

Ukikumo put his staff on his shoulder and walked close to Koishikawa.

Perhaps Koishikawa had been oppressed by that force, as he said, 'Please come this way,' urging them inside.

Yasohachi was still confused as he and Ukikumo went where Koishikawa had guided them. They were taken to a room that was probably a study. There was a writing desk inside.

'What is it you wanted to talk about?' asked Koishikawa once they had all sat down.

He looked ill at ease, with sweat on his forehead. In contrast, Ukikumo was leaning against the wall as he sat, one knee up.

'You know without me saying it, right?' asked Ukikumo.

'Pardon?' Koishikawa cocked his head.

'I'm talking about this,' Ukikumo said brusquely, throwing a bag of medicine at Koishikawa. It was the one he had received from Hijikata earlier.

'What on earth is this?'

Koishikawa shook his head and placed the bag on the desk.

'Oh, you're going to play dumb? Well, that makes sense. It'd be over for you if this got out.'

The eyes drawn on the red cloth Ukikumo was wearing stared straight at Koishikawa.

'Again, what are you talking about?'

'There's a girl you like, right?' Ukikumo continued to speak despite Koishikawa's troubled look. 'A daughter of the Nagai household named Tae.'

'I do know Tae-san of the Nagai household, but she and I are of different ranks. It isn't as if we are madly in love.'

'Boring!' spat out Ukikumo.

'Pardon me?'

'Everyone keeps talking about rank – boring blather. Do you think that's an excuse to say you haven't fallen for her?'

'I don't know what you're...'

'I'm saying that even if they are of different ranks, a man will fall in love with a woman.'

Ukikumo's words made Koishikawa's face twitch.

'What on earth are you talking about?'

'Lying to yourself like that has made you lose yourself.'

'Please be more...'

'Shut up and listen!'

Ukikumo jabbed Koishikawa's shoulder with his staff. Koishikawa fell backwards.

'What are you doing!?' interrupted Yasohachi, but Ukikumo stood up, ignoring him as he stared down at Koishikawa.

'I said this back then too, right? That I can see things that you can't – '

After saying that, Ukikumo pulled down the red cloth covering his eyes.

Under the glare of these deep red eyes, Koishikawa was shocked.

'W-what's with your eyes – '

Koishikawa kept growing paler. He was clearly terrified.

Ukikumo had probably seen such an expression countless times after revealing his red eyes. That was why he covered them with a cloth.

Yasohachi realised anew the darkness that Ukikumo carried with him.

'These eyes can see things others can't,' said Ukikumo.

'See things others can't?'

'Yes. For example, your heart – '

'Eek...'

Koishikawa tried to escape in his fear, but Ukikumo grabbed him by the collar and pushed his face to the tatami.

'I'm still talking.'

'Urgh...'

'Though you had fallen for Tae, she already had a betrothed. A man from a samurai family. Man named Shintarou.'

'I-I...'

'Because of your feelings for Tae, you tried to stop that marriage however you could. Then, you heard about the woman's ghost that appeared at the Hagiwara household and tried to use that.'

Yasohachi could vaguely see what had happened after hearing this much.

'Could it be that this person...' said Yasohachi.

Ukikumo nodded. 'Yeah. What he was giving to Shintarou was a strong sleeping medicine.'

The moment Ukikumo said that, Koishikawa shut his eyes tightly, perhaps in resignation.

'That's so...' Yasohachi spoke up without thinking.

Ukikumo had probably thought it strange from the start that Shintarou kept on sleeping.

That was why he'd taken Shintarou's medicine, given it to Hijikata and had him investigate it.

That wasn't all. With the information from Iori that Yasohachi had gathered, Ukikumo had even formulated the motive for Koishikawa's actions.

Ukikumo put his face close to Koishikawa's ear and whispered, 'You are a foolish man.' Then, he let go.

Koishikawa staggered up and glared at Ukikumo with anger and hatred.

'What is wrong with falling in love...' said Koishikawa, voice strained and tears in his eyes.

He sounded pained. That probably showed his strong feelings for Tae.

'So you're finally being honest?'

Ukikumo smiled in satisfaction.

Koishikawa looked at Ukikumo in surprise.

'I...'

'It's because you bound yourself with stupid things like rank and background to push down your feelings that you lost sight of yourself.'

'...'

'Whether samurai or townspeople, men fall in love with women. That is the way of human beings.'

'Is it all right that I fell in love with Tae?'

'A man doesn't need anyone's permission to fall in love with a woman.'

'I see...'

Koishikawa bit his lip tightly.

'And you've already fallen in love. That's why you tried to end the talks of Tae's marriage, right?'

'Yes...'

Koishikawa hung his head.

'If Shintarou and Tae's marriage had been some sort of political plan, I would've sympathised with you a bit. But those two love each other.'

'Urgh.'

'The woman named Tae fell in love with Shintarou. That makes you unnecessary.'

When Ukikumo said that, the tears in Koishikawa's eyes started to fall.

As Yasohachi saw that, he did not think it was pitiful or weak. Though he didn't agree with Koishikawa's methods, loving someone to the point of tears was, in some ways, a form of happiness.

'I know that... I know that, but...'

Koishikawa dug his fingers into the tatami as he sobbed.

'You're an idiot,' Ukikumo said mercilessly.

'Eh?'

'Though love can make people stronger, sometimes it turns them into demons. That is – the way of things.'

'I was a demon?'

Koishikawa turned pleading eyes towards Ukikumo.

'Yeah, a demon. A demon who lost himself to passion. If you're a man, don't just go around lusting after the woman you love – try hoping for her happiness instead.'

Ukikumo's words made Yasohachi feel warm inside.

Purely hoping for the happiness of the woman you loved wasn't something that simple, but Yasohachi felt like there was truth there.

– Perhaps Ukikumo has fallen in love before himself.

After a silence, Koishikawa said in a strained voice, 'Hope for... Tae-san's happiness...'

'If you're prepared to do that, I don't mind keeping silent about this,' said Ukikumo with a full-faced smile, staff on his shoulder.

The words seemed generous, but Yasohachi had a bad feeling.

It was clear from his expression that he was thinking of something that wasn't good.

'Yes...'

'Right. And now you owe me one. You know what I'm saying, right?'

Ukikumo probably meant to use this to make Koishikawa do as he wished.

Koishikawa probably understood that as well, but unable to refuse, he replied, head hung, 'Yes.'

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Yasohachi knelt with his back completely straight –

Shounosuke, Iori and Naosuke were sitting as well. They had been gathered to discuss Shintarou.

Yasohachi looked beside him. Ukikumo sat there, legs stretched out and staff across his legs.

The complete opposite of Yasohachi, who was a bundle of nerves, Ukikumo looked right at home.

'How is Shintarou then?'

Shounosuke looked at Ukikumo.

Ukikumo smiled confidently as usual, but Yasohachi felt chills.

They had determined that Koishikawa's sleeping medicine had been keeping Shintarou asleep, but Ukikumo had promised not to say anything.

– How on earth will he explain?

'That woman's ghost definitely cursed him,' Ukikumo said casually.

'A curse?'

'Yeah. Her strong ill intent has kept him asleep.'

– That's a lie, isn't it?

Yasohachi almost said that aloud. Still, he almost admired Ukikumo for his ability to lie so calmly.

'Can you expel the spirit?' asked Shounosuke.

Ukikumo put a hand on his pointed chin. He appeared to be deep in thought.

'It isn't impossible. My way of expelling spirits is a bit different from other people's though.'

'How is it different?' asked Shounosuke.

Ukikumo smiled as if he had been waiting for that question.

'Ghosts are clusters of people's emotions. Chanting sutras or putting up charms won't solve anything.'

'Is that so?'

'In any case, I've never done training, so I don't have that power,' said Ukikumo confidently.

'Then what will you do?'

'I'll convince the ghost.'

'Convince?' said Shounosuke in confusion.

It made sense for him to be confused. When expelling spirits, sutras and charms were the normal fare. However, Ukikumo had said he would convince the ghost.

Yasohachi hadn't been able to understand Ukikumo's methods before seeing himself either.

'I find the reason the ghost is wandering and solve it. Then, the ghost will be at peace.'

'I understand the logic... but what exactly are you going to do?' said Shounosuke, crossing his arms.

'First, the problem was who the ghost appearing every night was.'

'Who is it?' asked Iori.

'A prostitute from the red-light district. Her name is Otsuyu.'

It was the first time Yasohachi had heard that name too. 'How do you know?' he asked, which made Ukikumo snort.

'I had Tamamo investigate for me.'

The woman he had met in front of the shrine before. Now that Ukikumo mentioned it, he had said that he was going to ask Tamamo to investigate.

'Otsuyu was a prostitute at Mukaiya, in Naito-Shinjuku. However, ten days ago, she left her shop and has been missing since.'

'What is your reason for declaring that ghost to be the Otsuyu you mention?' asked Naosuke.

'This.'

Ukikumo took the hirauchi kanzashi from his sleeve and placed it on the tatami.

Yasohachi had picked it up at the roots of the willow. Iori took it in her hands and looked at it.

'I had it confirmed by someone who knows Otsuyu. This was definitely hers.'

Naosuke grew quiet after hearing Ukikumo's explanation.

'The person named Otsuyu-san is already dead then,' said Iori in a hoarse voice. Her eyes seemed sad.

Ukikumo nodded. 'She is.'

'I see...' murmured Iori, putting the kanzashi down on the tatami. Her fingers were trembling, just slightly.

'Now, the question is why Otsuyu came to this estate every night.'

'She came to see Shintarou-dono,' responded Naosuke.

'Probably,' said Ukikumo, voice a pitch lower. He stood up silently.

After looking at everyone in the room with the eyes painted on the red cloth he wore, he hit the tatami with his staff before continuing.

'That woman's ghost fell in love and became a demon. That's why she keeps coming to see the man she loves even after her death.'

'What will happen to him?' asked Iori anxiously.

'Otsuyu will probably keep coming here night after night, until finally the man she wants will come to her side –'

After saying that, Ukikumo hit the tatami once more.

'That is – the way of love.'

Everyone there was at a loss for words. Ukikumo's words were that dark and heavy.

It was true that one could say that was love, but continuing to visit the bedside of the person you love even after death was terribly frightening.'

'Is there any way to stop her?' pleaded Iori, leaning forward.

'Well, it isn't impossible,' said Ukikumo, sounding tired.

'What should we do?' urged Naosuke.

'From what I see, that ghost doesn't realize she's dead. That's why she's wandering.'

'Is it possible to not realize that you're dead?' asked Yasohachi.

Ukikumo snorted. 'It is. Normally you'd see your corpse after leaving your spirit and realise then, but what if the corpse was hidden?'

Yasohachi understood what Ukikumo was trying to say.

If one hadn't died slowly from illness but unexpectedly, one might not realise one's own death without seeing a body.

After Yasohachi said that, Ukikumo nodded.

'So do you know what we have to do to expel that woman's ghost?'

'Find the body and show it to the ghost,' responded Yasohachi. Ukikumo nodded again. Yasohachi understood the logic, but the problem was –

'Where is the body?' asked Iori in Yasohachi's stead.

Everyone's gazes concentrated on Ukikumo. He was silent for a while, but then he sat down cross-legged with a sigh.

'Unfortunately, it is impossible to solve this without knowing that.'

Ukikumo shook his head slightly.

There had been such build up that it was a disappointing ending.

While everyone was sighing in disappointment, one person kept looking at Ukikumo, and Yasohachi noticed.

It was nobody else but Iori –

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'What are you going to do now?' asked Yasohachi to Ukikumo, who stood next to him. They were in front of a stand called Shinshuuya that sold soba.

'I'm going to eat soba,' Ukikumo said, looking disappointed in Yasohachi for asking.

The owner took that moment to place bowls of soba in front of Yasohachi and Ukikumo.

Ukikumo smiled, looking incredibly happy. He put his face close to the bowl to enjoy the smell of the steam coming up from it and then started to slurp the noodles loudly.

'Not that – I'm talking about the Hagiwara household matter.'

Though Ukikumo had boasted about being able to expel spirits, all he had done in the end was explain the situation and leave.

'Ah, that...'

'Please don't play dumb. You have some kind of idea, right?'

Since it was Ukikumo, he wouldn't be completely without a plan.

'Well, you could say that.'

'Please tell me.'

'Don't be in such a rush. Fill yourself up first.'

'We can't be so leisurely...'

'If you won't eat, I will.'

Ukikumo, who had finished his bowl in no time at all, looked at Yasohachi's untouched bowl.

Yasohachi didn't like how Ukikumo had evaded the question, but he didn't want to let Ukikumo have his soba either. Yasohachi quickly gulped his soba down.

'Now, it's about time,' murmured Ukikumo once Yasohachi finished his bowl.

'Time?'

'For the mouse to get caught by the trap.'

After saying that, Ukikumo said to the owner of the stand, 'It was delicious.' Then, he started to walk away. Yasohachi didn't understand, but he followed anyway.

'What do you mean by time? And what on earth is trap supposed to mean?'

Yasohachi's questions made Ukikumo stop walking.

'Somebody's been following us, see,' Ukikumo muttered.

'Eh?'

When Yasohachi turned around frantically, Ukikumo smacked his head.

'Idiot! You'll be noticed.'

After saying that gruffly, Ukikumo started to walk again.

Though Yasohachi followed him, he felt uncomfortable, as if he were floating.

When he turned around earlier, for just a moment, he had seen someone looking at them, hiding under the eaves of a row house.

It was a face he recognized.

The person was lori.

No, he must have seen wrong. It couldn't have been lori. There was no reason for lori to follow them.

However, the more he denied it, the more he thought it was lori.

If he turned around again to check once more, he might be noticed, just as Ukikumo said.

Why couldn't they be noticed anyway? What on earth was Ukikumo thinking?

Questions kept coming to Yasohachi when Ukikumo suddenly stopped.

They were in front of the willow where Yasohachi had seen the woman's ghost. The hanging branches shook uncannily in the night wind.

'It really was here.'

Ukikumo smiled in satisfaction.

'What was?'

Ukikumo didn't reply to Yasohachi's question. He just went down to the riverbank by the willow.

– What is he thinking?

Yasohachi had that question in his head, but he followed Ukikumo to the riverbank regardless.

'As I thought, the body was buried there,' said Ukikumo, pointing his staff at the ground.

His gaze was on a crouching person. That person leapt up in shock at Ukikumo's voice.

It was a face Yasohachi recognized. It was –

'You bastard! You saw!'

That person screamed and unsheathed their sword. Then, they rushed forward.

– I'm going to be sliced through.

The moment Yasohachi thought that, something pushed him aside and he fell to the ground.

– What on earth is happening?

Yasohachi looked up. His eyes went wide in shock.

The person who had suddenly rushed at Yasohachi was Naosuke. The person who was standing in front of Yasohachi to protect him was Iori.

'I-Iori-san!' exclaimed Yasohachi. Naosuke took a step back.

Yasohachi took that chance to stand up.

'Please step back.'

Iori stepped forward, as if to be Yasohachi's shield.

'No. There's no way you'll win,' said Yasohachi.

Iori glared at him sharply. 'Because I'm a girl?'

'No. Because a wooden sword can't cross with a real one.'

'Weather a metal sword or a wooden one, it is the skill of the wielder that determines the match.'

'But...'

Yasohachi tried to speak, but Naosuke took that moment to charge, shouting 'Yah!' as he did so.

Iori didn't falter. At the same time as she blocked Naosuke's sword, knocking it to the side with her wooden sword, she plunged forward. Her tip of her wooden sword was at Naosuke's neck.

It only took a moment.

'Shintani-sama. Please sheathe your sword. Any further action would be meaningless,' said Iori, wooden sword still at Naosuke's neck. Naosuke looked down.

'Amazing! That's amazing!' Yasohachi approached Iori in his excitement.

'Please stay away.'

Iori pushed Yasohachi aside. Naosuke took that chance.

With a smirk, Naosuke knocked Iori aside with his body and sliced sideways with his sword.

Though Iori's quick evasion saved her from being sliced in half, she still let out a short 'Urgh' and fell to the ground, clutching her right arm.

Red blood was flowing out of Iori's arm. The moment Yasohachi saw that, he felt like somebody had lit a fire in him.

Before he'd noticed it, he was standing in front of Iori and glaring at Naosuke.

Iori had clearly been the better swordsman. However, Naosuke's heartless nature and, more than anything, Yasohachi's own carelessness had decided the match.

Because of that, Yasohachi couldn't forgive Naosuke. He could not back down.

'How could you do that to Iori-san!?' shouted Yasohachi.

Naosuke sneered. 'What can a townsman like you do? Unarmed, at that.'

'Shut up!'

Yasohachi tried to rush forward at Naosuke, but he couldn't. It wasn't because he had been cut. Somebody had grabbed his collar and dragged him back, pushing him down.

Yasohachi looked up in shock to see Ukikumo standing there.

'Are you all idiots? Don't forget about me.'

It was true that the events had been so surprising that he had forgotten that he had come here with Ukikumo. It seemed like Naosuke had been the same way. He looked displeased.

'You bastards...' Naosuke said bitterly.

'You'd even cut your own betrothed down to protect your own sorry self – you're a disgrace to all men.'

Ukikumo's tone was filled with scorn.

Yasohachi felt the same way. No matter the reason, raising your sword towards your betrothed was inexcusable.

'Shut your mouth!'

'Nope, don't feel like it. Why did Otsuyu fall for a good-for-nothing man like you?'

'You!'

'Stop howling! Can't you see her?'

After saying that, Ukikumo pointed beside Naosuke. A woman was standing there. The woman's ghost who appeared at the Hagiwara household every night – Otsuyu.

She smiled bewitchingly as she nestled close to Naosuke.

'Eeeek!' shrieked Naosuke, backing away as he trembled in fear.

Otsuyu looked at him, entranced, and reached out with her hands.

'Stay away! Stay away! Stay away!'

Naosuke waved his sword about madly, but the sword just kept going through the woman.

'What are you so afraid of? She keeps coming to see the man she fell for, even after death. Isn't that nice of her?'

Ukikumo's words made Naosuke turn angry.

'You bastard! This is you're doing, isn't it!? You're showing me an illusion!'

'Don't turn your eyes away from reality.'

'Shut up! I'll cut you down!'

Naosuke raised his sword.

However, Ukikumo was not fazed. He just smiled confidently at him.

'That's a nice show, but you could never touch me.'

'What?'

'You don't understand anything.'

'Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!' screamed Naosuke, gripping the sword tightly.

Ukikumo still was not fazed. How could he be so calm in this situation? Yasohachi was wondering that when somebody expected appeared.

A woman appeared, overlapping with the ghost of Otsuyu at Naosuke's side.

It was Tamamo –

'Die!'

The moment Naosuke tried to step forward – Tamamo reached out and grabbed his arm.

The sudden action made Naosuke's face contort in fear.

'W-who are you...'

'There is no need for you to know,' said Tamamo. Then, she took the kanzashi from her hair and thrust the tip into Naosuke's neck, slowly letting it sink into him.

Naosuke's face grew paler and paler, and then he collapsed to the ground like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

It was so sudden that all Yasohachi could do was stand there in shock.

Iori was the same way. Her mouth was gaping.

'Is he dead?' said Yasohachi, finally able to strangle words out of his mouth.

'No, he has just fainted,' responded Tamamo. Her smile could almost be called obscene.

Yasohachi didn't know where she had come from, but she had probably hidden behind Naosuke during his and Ukikumo's exchange.

Perhaps she had discussed this with Ukikumo beforehand, and that was why Ukikumo had said that Naosuke would never be able to touch him.

'Are you all right?' asked Yasohachi after coming to his senses. He looked at Iori, who was sitting on the floor.

'Yes.' Iori gave him a small nod and stood up slowly.

'Please show me your injury.'

'Something of this level is nothing to worry about.'

'Just show me.'

Yasohachi rolled up Iori's sleeve and looked at the injury.

Fortunately, it wasn't that deep and it had already stopped bleeding. Though Yasohachi felt relieved, he took his hand towel and wrapped it around the injury.

'Thank you,' said Iori in an incredibly quiet voice as she looked away from Yasohachi.

Though things had settled down a bit, a flood of questions suddenly came to Yasohachi.

'What on earth just happened?'

He looked at Ukikumo.

'It's simple. The ghost of Otsuyu which appeared at the Hagiwara household every night was not going to see Shintarou but Naosuke.'

'Eh?'

'Naosuke frequented the red-light district. He had a relationship with the prostitute named Otsuyu. Well, from Naosuke's perspective, it was just playing around. He was courting the Hagiwara household's daughter, after all.'

Ukikumo looked at Iori.

Iori looked a bit surprised, but she said nothing.

'But Otsuyu-san was serious?' asked Yasohachi.

Ukikumo nodded.

'He probably joked about paying her out of bondage even though he had no plans of doing so. It would have been fine if Otsuyu had just taken those words as a joke, but she had believed in them – '

'And that was troublesome for Naosuke-san.'

'Otsuyu, in love with Naosuke, escaped from her shop. She had probably planned on eloping with Naosuke.'

'Isn't that strictly forbidden?'

'Yeah. They'd be in big trouble if they were found. Plus the betrothal to the woman he actually fell for would be gone – '

Ukikumo looked at Iori again.

Though Iori looked grave, she returned the gaze. She had a strong heart.

Yasohachi could imagine what had happened afterwards after hearing this much.

'And then Naosuke-san killed Otsuyu-san – '

– How awful.

Yasohachi shuddered at the words that had come out of his mouth.

'Exactly. And he hid the body here.'

Ukikumo pointed at where Tamamo was standing.

Now that Yasohachi took another look, there was a small whole there. Naosuke had probably been digging out the body.

– Why?

That question came to Ukikumo, but the answer followed soon after.

In the conversation at the Hagiwara household, Ukikumo had said that if the ghost saw the body, it would realise that it was dead and would leave in peace.

So that had been a trick to lure Naosuke out.

'Otsuyu-san came to the Hagiwara household every night because she hated Naosuke-san for killing her – not because of Shintarou-san then,' said Yasohachi, but Ukikumo shook his head.

'That's not it.'

'It isn't?'

'Otsuyu still loves Naosuke after being killed by him.'

'But that's – '

Yasohachi was shocked.

Would I be able to love somebody who killed me – he thought about it, but he didn't know.

'That is – the way of love.'

Ukikumo struck the ground with his staff.

Though Yasohachi understood the matter with Naosuke, there was one more thing he didn't understand.

'Iori-san, why are you here?' asked Yasohachi.

Iori looked down awkwardly.

'You thought I was suspicious – right?' said Ukikumo in Iori's stead.

Though Iori was silent for a while, she soon nodded.

'Why did you think Ukikumo-san suspicious?'

Why had Iori looked at Ukikumo with suspicion when he had been trying to help Shintarou?

'That's – ' Iori looked up, determined, and said, ' – because he pretend to be blind even though he can see.'

So she had realised. An exorcist that pretend to be blind – it was true that that was more suspicious than anything.

Under Iori's sharp gaze, Ukikumo smiled, seeming incredibly amused.

'There's a reason for that.'

As Ukikumo said that, he lowered the red cloth covering his eyes.

His crimson eyes were revealed under the moonlight.

Iori's eyes went wide in surprise, but that soon changed to an entranced smile.

'How beautiful...' she said.

Yasohachi smiled without thinking. He was incredibly happy that Iori felt the same way as him.

Ukikumo's red eyes really were beautiful.

'Honestly... Everyone around Hachi is an idiot,' said Ukikumo wryly, covering his eyes again with the red cloth. Though it was just for a moment, Ukikumo's lips seemed to have been turned up in a smile.

'So the story has ended – '

Tamamo was the one who spoke.

Under the faint moonlight, her figure was so beautiful it seemed otherworldly.

'It has,' responded Ukikumo.

'Then I will take this man into my care.'

'Do as you wish.'

Ukikumo turned around and started to walk away.

'Eh? What's going to happen to Naosuke-san?'

Yasohachi hurriedly ran after Ukikumo.

'Tamamo will make him pay the debt. The red-light district has its own rules, see.'

'Debt? What is that going to be?'

'You don't need to know.'

'But...'

Iori didn't look like she would accept that either.

'A guest of the Hagiwara household killed a prostitute – if a rumour like that spread, that would cast a shadow on Shintarou's betrothal. That isn't all. It would be bad for the Hagiwara household as a whole,' said Ukikumo, looking at Iori.

It looked like Iori wasn't sure what to decide. She just held her breath.

'Naosuke will disappear, never appearing at the Hagiwara household again. That's all – '

After saying just that, Ukikumo started walking away again briskly.

That said, Yasohachi couldn't accept that. Iori seemed to feel the same way as she stood there, frozen.

'I really don't – ' said Yasohachi, turning around, but he stopped speaking in surprise at what he saw.

Tamamo and Naosuke were gone. It was as if they had been swallowed by the darkness –

Instead, Otsuyu just stood there, looking up at the willow with a sorrowful expression on her face.

Though Yasohachi had thought her frightening the first time he saw her, now he felt differently.

No matter the kind of man her partner had been, Otsuyu's heart had not been filled with hatred or angry but a wholehearted love.

That made Otsuyu so beautiful that it took Yasohachi's breath away.

Finally, Otsuyu disappeared as well, swallowed up by the shadows –

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epilogue

-

Yasohachi visited the shrine that Ukikumo had made his stronghold.

'Hello!'

After calling out in front of the shrine building, Ukikumo yelled back from inside, 'Come in.'

Yasohachi opened the door, but he froze in shock at what he saw.

Though Ukikumo looked the same as always, wearing his kimono sloppily and drinking sake, somebody completely unexpected was sitting in front of him.

Iori –

She knelt in front of Ukikumo with her spine perfectly straight.

'Iori-san.'

'Oh, it's you, Yasohachi-dono,' responded Iori.

'Why are you here, Iori-san?'

'My brother has opened his eyes, so I came to express my gratitude.'

'Is that so? Thank goodness.'

Yasohachi was truly relieved as he sat down.

'I was thinking of visiting you as well to thank you, Yasohachi-dono.'

'No, I didn't do anything...'

Yasohachi felt a bit embarrassed as he scratched his head. Then, he noticed a gaze on him. It was Ukikumo. His narrowed red eyes spoke unjust suspicion.

'What is it?' said Yasohachi a bit sulkily, but Ukikumo just sighed.

'So what do you want, Hachi?'

'Ah, that's right –'

Yasohachi had almost forgotten, what with meeting Iori here unexpectedly. He spread out the painting he had brought on the floor.

It was a painting of Otsuyu standing under the willow with a sorrowful expression on her face.

'How beautiful!' exclaimed Iori in admiration.

Those two words made Yasohachi's heart leap. However, Ukikumo on the other hand was looking at the painting critically, his chin in his hand.

'Not bad, but you've still got a ways to go.'

Yasohachi wasn't irritated by Ukikumo's words. He himself wasn't satisfied yet either.

'I will be diligent in my efforts to improve.'

'I'll take this painting,' Ukikumo said.

'I don't mind, but what will you do with it?'

'Give it to Tamamo.'

The unworldly beauty of Tamamo's figure came up in Yasohachi's head.

Why are you going to give it to her – that question came to Yasohachi, but he felt like it was something he couldn't ask.

'Then I'll take my leave.'

At this lull in conversation, Iori stood up and left the shrine.

'Are you all right with that?' said Ukikumo the moment Iori left. He sounded displeased.

'All right with what?'

'All right with not chasing after her.'

'It's not like I...'

'Honestly. You haven't learnt anything. No matter birth or breeding, men fall in love with women.'

'I said...'

'Stop jabbering and just go,' Ukikumo said rudely, kicking Yasohachi.

Yasohachi ended up being chased out of the shrine building. He wasn't sure what had happened. When he stepped out, he saw Iori walking through the torii.

'Iori-san,' called out Yasohachi, though hesitantly.

Iori slowly turned around.

With a faint smile on her face, she was indisputably beautiful.

'Er – would you allow me to paint a picture of you next time, Iori-san?' asked Yasohachi, his heart beating loudly in his chest –

Chapter 3. THE WAY OF A CURSE



-

prologue

-

There was a painting on a scroll –

It was a somewhat strange painting.

A man stood by an old well. He wore worn hakama and his hair was not in a topknot, instead dishevelled about his head.

The man's face was as pale as a corpse. His right hand gripped a bloody sword.

That wasn't all that was strange about the painting.

The man was holding somebody's hair with his left hand. Hanging from the hair was a human head.

Not just one. There were four.

Though it was certainly a gruesome and frightening painting, for some reason, it had a beauty that fascinated its viewers.

Nobody knew the goal of the painting.

However, there was a rumour. A rumour that the painting held a samurai's curse –

And that misfortune befell any house that put the painting on display –

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1

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It was a sticky, humid night –

Hagiwara Shintarou was lying in his futon, but he couldn't fall asleep.

Part of it was the sweat clinging to his body, but it might have been because he had been sleeping too much recently.

That said, he hadn't just been lazing around. Shintarou himself couldn't remember that well himself, but it seemed he had been asleep for seven whole days because a ghost had possessed him.

Shintarou was dwelling on that when he heard a faint noise.

At first, he thought it was the distant howl of a dog or some other animal. However, it was different. It sounded like a person's voice.

Furthermore – it seemed to be calling him.

Shintarou slowly sat up, rubbed his eyes and looked around, but nobody was in the dark room.

Now that he thought about it, nobody would be calling him so late at night. He must have mistook a dream for reality.

If he talked to his sister Iori about it, she would definitely laugh at him for being so nervous.

After smiling self-derisively, Shintarou lay down once more, but then he heard the voice again –

He still couldn't make out the words, but he wasn't mistaken. He definitely heard something.

It came from the other side of the sliding door. It seemed to be from the garden.

'Who is it?'

Shintarou got out of bed and flung the sliding door open.

Then – he saw a man standing under the pale moonlight.

He stood in the corner of the garden, by a well that nobody used.

He seemed to be wearing rags, but on closer inspection, it was a hakama. He had a sword at his waist.

– It seems he is a samurai.

Since the man was turned the other way, Shintarou could not see his face. It looked like the man was crying.

Why did he come to someone else's estate in the middle of the night? That question would be natural, but for some reason, it did not occur to Shintarou.

'Is something the matter?'

After Shintarou called out, the man slowly turned around.

It was dim, and the man was at a distance. Shintarou could not see the man's face clearly. He felt like he had seen it somewhere before, but he couldn't remember.

The man said something, still looking Shintarou's way.

At first, it just sounded like a moan, so Shintarou couldn't make out what he was saying. However, when he strained his ears, he could tell that the man was murmuring the same words.

– It hurts... Help...

'Do you feel unwell?' asked Shintarou.

The man leaned over the well, peering in.

The next moment, the man disappeared.

'Ah!'

– Did he fall into the well?

Shintarou rushed over, pulled off the well's cover and peered in, but no matter how he looked, he didn't see the man –

He couldn't have fallen into the well in the first place, since Shintarou had been the one who pulled off the cover.

– Then where did that man go?

'Maybe that was just a trick of the eye...'

Though Shintarou muttered that to convince himself, he just couldn't accept that.

A man had definitely been there just earlier. He had definitely spoken as well.

– Aaagh!

Shintarou had been pondering when a woman's deathly shriek reached his ears.

It sounded like it had come from the neighbouring Aoyama estate. That definitely wasn't an illusion.

– Maybe the man from earlier...!

Shintarou started running.

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2

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Yasohachi visited the Hagiwara estate after noon –

A servant led him to the guestroom, which had a view of the garden.

Yasohachi sat on the tatami, placed his art tools beside him and took deep breaths. He was restless – he just couldn't relax.

He had come to the Hagiwara estate today to paint.

– Would you allow me to paint a picture of you, lori-san?

Yasohachi had made that request of lori, the daughter of the Hagiwara household, five days ago.

lori had seemed divided, but she had accepted with this reply: 'If you would be fine with me.' That was what had brought Yasohachi here today.

Did Yasohachi want to paint lori because he was charmed by her lovely and elegant beauty as an art subject or for another reason –

Yasohachi didn't know if he was in love, but it was a fact that he simply wanted to meet her again.

While Yasohachi was thinking, the sliding door slid open.

Yasohachi quickly sat up straight and lifted his head, but the person who came in was not lori.

It was lori's brother, Shintarou.

'Eh? Ah, er...' Yasohachi was flustered by the appearance of somebody he had not expected.

'Please don't freeze so.'

Shintarou gave him a friendly smile and sat in front of Yasohachi.

Though his expression was gentle, he was still a man from a samurai family – the way he sat was dignified and looked good.

'Er, but... Um...'

'It's the first time we've met like this, isn't it?'

The last time Yasohachi had come to the Hagiwara household, Shintarou had still been asleep, unable to wake up.

As a result, it was just as Shintarou said. Yasohachi had seen Shintarou asleep, but it was the first time they had met like this.

'Ah, yes.'

'I heard from my sister. I am very much in your debt.'

Shintarou bowed his head deeply.

'No, not at all... Please lift your head.'

Shintarou, the heir to a samurai family, was bowing his head to a mere townsman like Yasohachi. Yasohachi was at a loss in this unthinkable situation.

It would be a serious problem if anybody saw them like this.

'Please don't... Please, just lift your head.'

However, in contrast to Yasohachi's anxiety, Shintarou was composed. Though he lifted his head, he was still smiling gently.

'But it is true that I am in your debt. It is only natural to express my gratitude.'

'No, I didn't do anything...'

He wasn't been humble.

The person who had actually solved the mystery of what was happening to Shintarou was Ukikumo, an exorcist.

Yasohachi had only realised what was happening after everything was solved.

'I heard that you also protected my sister even though it put you in danger.'

Shintarou's eyes crinkled in a smile.

That was also incorrect. Actually, Yasohachi had been the one who had been saved. Iori had only been in danger because of Yasohachi's carelessness.

Though Yasohachi wanted to explain, the words wouldn't come out properly. 'No, er...'

'Because my sister is as strict as she is, she doesn't have any friends her age. Please continue to be friendly with her.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

Iori came into the room suddenly and interrupted.

She was in her usual hakama attire, perhaps because she had been practising with her wooden sword again. However, her lovely beauty was the same as always.

'Exactly what I said. That you're strait-laced.'

'Brother, I would appreciate it if you would think more like somebody from a samurai family.'

Iori replied to Shintarou's frivolous response with exasperation.

'If you're going to say that, why don't you act a bit more meekly like a girl, Iori?'

'That has nothing to do with anything.'

In contrast to Iori's displeased expression, Shintarou's laughter was loud.

No matter what was said, the siblings were on good terms.

'Brother, have you already discussed the matter?' asked Iori, once the conversation was over. Shintarou's bright expression turned darker at once.

Yasohachi's heart beat more loudly in the strained atmosphere.

'What matter do you speak of?' he asked, leaning forward slightly.

'Actually, I saw a ghost last night.'

Shintarou's expression as different from how it had been earlier.

'A ghost?'

'Yes. Just by that well.'

Shintarou pointed at the old well in the corner of the garden and started to talk about the ghost of a samurai he had seen last night. His words were clear and detailed, to the point that it gave Yasohachi shivers as the scene drew itself out in his head.

'How frightening,' said Yasohachi without thinking when Shintarou mentioned the ghost's disappearance.

'I wouldn't have been that worried if that had been all – I could have written it off as a trick of the eye. However, there's more – '

Shintarou looked straight at Yasohachi.

His eyes were frightening. Yasohachi shuddered.

'There's more?'

Yasohachi gulped and held his breath.

'Yes. A while after the man disappeared, I heard a scream.'

'A scream...'

'Yes, a woman's scream. It sounded like she was dying. I immediately knew where the scream was coming from.'

'Was it from the well?'

'No, it was from the neighbouring Aoyama estate.'

'The one next door?'

'Yes. I ran to the Aoyama estate. There was a big commotion. When I asked one of the retainers about the situation, I was told that a female servant had been killed. And that wasn't all – '

Here, Shintarou paused and looked at Yasohachi. There was no shadow of his gentle smile left.

'What is it?' asked Yasohachi, when Shintarou didn't continue.

Shintarou smiled slightly and said, Apparently, the ghost of a samurai came out of a painted wall scroll and killed the servant.'

'That's ridiculous!' said Yasohachi immediately.

It was unbelievable. He thought that perhaps Shintarou was taking him in, but Shintarou's expression was incredibly serious.

Iori was also listening silently.

'I made a request, so I was allowed into the estate and brought to see the wall scroll in question.'

'You really went?'

'Yes. It was – '

Shintarou stopped and narrowed his eyes.

There was something unsettling about his gaze.

After a long silence, he said, 'It was a see a blood – '

'Blood?'

'Yes. The servant was collapsed on the floor. Her neck had been cut, and blood had splattered out from there.'

'What!?''

Gooseflesh rose on Yasohachi's skin as he imagined the gruesome scene.

'There was a wall scroll in the room, just as I was told.'

'There was?'

'Yes. There was a painting of a samurai – I don't know how to describe it, but it was a very frightening painting.'

A samurai cutting off the head of a demon – probably a painting like that, of malevolent spirits. However, that wouldn't make sense as a wall scroll.

'What surprised me most was – ' here, Shintarou stopped and shut his eyes, as if trying to remember something ' – that the samurai painted on the scroll looked just like the one I had seen by the old well.'

Though Yasohachi had somewhat expected that, hearing the words from Shintarou's mouth made him feel dizzy.

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3

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'You idiot!'

That was what the man sitting against the wall – Ukikumo – yelled out the moment Yasohachi finished speaking.

Yasohachi was inside a lopsided shrine.

Ukikumo was an odd man who made a living as an exorcist and had decided to just take an abandoned shrine and make it his base.

He was an always-drinking thief and philanderer, but he did have skill as an exorcist.

He wore his white kimono sloppily. His skin was just as pale as the kimono, so his thin red lips looked especially bewitching.

His eyes, narrowed under sleepy eyelids, were dyed crimson.

His eyes weren't just red.

According to the man himself, they could see the spirits of the dead – that is, ghosts.

'What is so idiotic about it?' objected Yasohachi sulkily.

'It's idiotic, so I'm saying it's idiotic,' retorted Ukikumo. He gulped down some sake from his cup.

'And I'm asking why you're saying that.'

'You said a samurai came out of a painting and killed a servant.'

Ukikumo's narrowed eyes seemed to let off a red light.

'Yes.'

'Only an idiot would believe a story like that without suspicion.'

'But Shintarou-san said it, so..'

'That's why I'm saying you're an idiot.'

Ukikumo waved his hand as if to chase away a fly.

Hearing idiot, idiot all the time like that really got on Yasohachi's nerves.

'What do you mean?'

'People don't always tell the truth.'

Yasohachi knew what Ukikumo was trying to say. Liars and boasters were abound. But –

'Shintarou-san wouldn't lie.'

'Who can say? Not even he could.'

After saying that, Ukikumo sighed.

His eyes made it clear – he didn't trust anybody. Yasohachi wanted to ask why Ukikumo thought that way, but the man's dark mood made him hesitate.

'What about your painting then?' asked Ukikumo after a pause.

'Yes?'

'What a slow guy you are. You went to paint a picture of that lass called Iori, right?'

'It is as you say.'

'Did you?'

'No. You see...'

Because of Shintarou's ghost story, Yasohachi's original goal of painting Iori remained undecided.

'Honestly. You came back with a ghost story without even painting a picture of her? You really are an idiot,' grumbled Ukikumo, pouring sake from his gourd into his cup.

Though it had not been Yasohachi's original goal, now that he had heard the story, he couldn't leave it alone.

'Please don't say that – won't you lend a hand?'

'Don't want to!'

Ukikumo gulped down his sake cup and then lay down right there.

It would be very troublesome for Yasohachi if Ukikumo fell into a bad temper. He had been unable to just do nothing when he saw how anxious Iori and Shintarou had been, so he had promised to bring Ukikumo.

'Please don't say that. There should be considerable compensation.'

'Sorry, but it's not my job.'

'Do you doubt Shintarou's story?'

'Yeah, I do.'

'But...'

'If that story is true, then it definitely isn't my job.'

Ukikumo yawned, seeming incredibly bored.

'What do you mean?'

Putting aside if it was a lie, but if it was truth, then it would be Ukikumo's job, as he was an exorcist.

'You just don't get it. My speciality is ghosts.'

Ukikumo ran a hand through his hair in irritation and sat up.

'Yes.'

Yasohachi knew that without Ukikumo repeating it.

'Ghosts are the spirits of people after they've died. In short, they're like clusters of emotion.'

'Yes, I remember.'

Yasohachi had heard Ukikumo's thoughts on ghosts before.

'If a samurai came out of a painting and killed a servant, that wouldn't be a ghost.'

'It wouldn't?'

'It wouldn't. Emotions can't kill people.'

'Then what can?'

'If it's true, it'd be something of the monster variety – '

'Is a monster different from a ghost?'

'Completely different. That's why I'm saying it's outside my field.'

After saying that, Ukikumo lay down again and closed his eyes.

Yasohachi understood what Ukikumo was saying, though vaguely. However, he couldn't back down now.

'Then, could you at least go to confirm whether it's a ghost or a monster?'

'Not going.'

So this was what being curt was.

However, Yasohachi had a trump card. Though Ukikumo was troublesome, he was extraordinarily greedy.

'For this case, you will receive compensation whether you expel the spirit or not, but will you still not go?'

Yasohachi's words made Ukikumo's closed eyelids twitch. However, that was all.

'There's no way it'd be that good. You're always all talk, Hachi.'

'It hurts me to hear you say that.'

'How about your promise to let me meet Osayo?'

'Ah...'

Hitting him where it hurt.

The condition Ukikumo had set before solving the mystery of what was happening to Shintarou was that Yasohachi let Ukikumo and Yasohachi's older sister, Osayo, meet.

However, that promise still hadn't been fulfilled.

'It's fine this time. Shintarou is the one making the advance payment. The Aoyama household will pay the rest once the case is solved,' Yasohachi said to smooth things over.

'Do you think I'll be convinced by money?'

– I do.

Yasohachi almost let that slip, but everything would come to nothing if Ukikumo's temper turned foul now.

'You just have to go look – '

'I don't mind thinking about – it if you make good on that promise from before.'

Ukikumo grinned, showing his white teeth.

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4

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Evening approached, and the sky grew vermillion as Yasohachi walked –

Of course, Ukikumo was with him.

It had taken some time to convince Ukikumo. Though Yasohachi had used Osayo as bait, he didn't intend on actually letting them meet.

Ukikumo had a love for women. Yasohachi had an idea about why Ukikumo wanted to meet Osayo.

'Honestly, what a pain,' grumbled Ukikumo lazily, walking with his staff in one hand.

He had a red cloth over his two eyes and was pretending to be blind in order to hide his two red eyes.

Though Yasohachi thought them beautiful, Ukikumo said that most people in the world did not.

However, even though Ukikumo was hiding them that way, he had painted eyes in ink on the red cloth. Doing that made him stand out more and look even stranger.

'Don't say that. Please just go take a look. They are a samurai family, so the compensation should be a considerable amount.'

'That's the problem,' said Ukikumo with a click of his tongue.

'What do you mean?'

A miser like Ukikumo should have been happy to receive more money.

'I hate samurai families.'

Now that Ukikumo mentioned it, he had said something similar during the incident with Shintarou. Perhaps he had a special reason.

'Why do you hate samurai families so much?'

'I hate the things I hate.'

'You sound like a child.'

'Shut up! Forget about that – somebody's waiting.'

Ukikumo sopped and pointed his staff in front of him. Iori stood in front of the Hagiwara estate gates.

It seemed she had been waiting for them.

'I apologise for arriving late.'

Yasohachi rushed over.

Iori smiled at him. 'Not at all.' Then, she looked at Ukikumo. 'Ukikumo-dono. Thank you very much for coming.'

'I'm getting paid, right?'

Ukikumo's attitude was rude in contrast to Iori's polite bow. However, Iori didn't look annoyed. She just nodded.

'Show me to the well where the ghost was spotted first,' said Ukikumo, putting his staff on his shoulder.

'Aren't you going to look at the painting?' asked Yasohachi.

Ukikumo's displeasure was evident. 'Idiot. There's an order to things.'

'Then please say that from the start. I was sure that I would be seeing the painting.'

'Stop whining – you're so noisy.'

'I'm not noisy. Your explanations are always lacking, Ukikumo-san.'

As Iori watched Yasohachi and Ukikumo argue, she started to giggle.

'Is something amusing?' asked Yasohachi.

'Your conversation was just so amusing that I – '

'There isn't anything amusing about it. I'm irritated.'

'It doesn't look that way to me,' Iori said without any delay. That made Yasohachi feel a bit awkward. He couldn't think of a retort.

Ukikumo yawned like he didn't care at all.

After things calmed down, Iori said, 'I apologise, but actually, my brother has left with my father because of an urgent errand...'

'I don't care. That makes things easier,' replied Ukikumo with a shrug.

Though Iori knew about Ukikumo's red eyes, Shintarou did not.

Just as Ukikumo aid, having Shintarou absent might make things easier since there would be less need for explanation.

'Then please head this way – '

Iori invited them in through the Hagiwara estate's gates and guided them to the old well in the garden where the ghost had appeared.

The rocks surrounding the well had moss all over them, and the plank used as a cover was rotten.

Yasohachi had seen it in the day too, but it left a different impression at night.

Ukikumo took the cloth off his eyes, revealing his eyes, a crimson as vivid as the setting sun. Yasohachi was entranced by their beauty, but he didn't dare to say it.

'So where did your brother see the ghost?' asked Ukikumo, going around the well.

'He said that he saw the ghost around there.'

Iori pointed to the right of the well.

Ukikumo nodded and stood where she was pointing. He looked around again.

'Did the ghost say something?'

'Apparently it kept saying "It hurts" and "Help".'

'And then it disappeared into the well.'

'Yes, that's what my brother said he saw.'

As Ukikumo listened to Iori's reply, he pulled off the well's cover and leant over to peer in.

Yasohachi also peered in, taking care not to get in Ukikumo's way.

It was complete dark. Yasohachi couldn't see anything.

However – it was different for Ukikumo.

Ukikumo's red eye could see the spirits of the dead – that is, ghosts.

'Did you see something?' asked Yasohachi.

Ukikumo looked up from the well.

'Too dark to see anything.'

Because Yasohachi had been expectant, Ukikumo's curt reply made him disappointed. Ukikumo didn't seem to care. He just threw a small rock into the well.

After a few moments, there was the sound of a splash.

Ukikumo let out a 'Hm' and turned to look at Iori.

'How long has this well been out of use?'

'Hm... I think it's been about a year.'

'There's still water though – '

'I don't know the details either, but apparently it isn't used any more because it smelled foul and the water was dirty.'

'I see,' Ukikumo replied. He put a hand to his pointed chin. He appeared to be thinking.

'Does something concern you?' asked Yasohachi.

Ukikumo smiled wryly. 'There's no point thinking too much now. Let's go look at that painting next – ' – Finally, eh?

Yasohachi could feel his heart thumping loudly.

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5

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Iori led Yasohachi and Ukikumo through the gates of the Aoyama household –

Though Yasohachi did not know much about the ranks of samurai families, the Aoyama estate was much larger than Iori's, so the household must have had considerable standing.

After they went in, a female servant named Okiku greeted them.

'Did you see the ghost?' Ukikumo asked as Okiku guided them in.

Okiku's shoulders shuddered at the sudden question and she stopped in her tracks. Then, she slowly turned around.

Okiku had a round and cute face, but she was so pale she looked sickly.

'I saw it...' she replied in a hoarse voice.

'Oh? Where?'

'The room with the wall scroll. I heard a noise that night so I went to the room, and then...'

Okiku covered her mouth. She was shaking terribly – she seemed afraid.

'Are you sure it came out of the painting?' asked Yasohachi. Okiku's gaze was unfocussed, like she was thinking about something, and then she replied, 'That was how it looked to me...'

A ghost came out of a painting – Ukikumo had said it was a tall tale, but if somebody had actually seen it, it was undoubtedly fact.

Okiku led them to the inner guestroom.

'It is quite a large estate,' said Yasohachi, looking around the room after Okiku had left.

'Aoyama is a noted family that has served the Tokugawa shogunate for a long time. They should hold an important office in the shogunate even now. Well, this does appear to be a branch family...'

The one who replied was not Iori but Ukikumo.

He had his staff on his lap, looking incredibly displeased as he sat there.

He knew a lot about samurai families for somebody who said he didn't like them. Yasohachi told Ukikumo that, but Ukikumo immediately retorted, 'Hating something and knowing something are completely different matters.'

Then, the sliding door opened and a man came in.

He was probably about the same age as Shintarou. He had dark, tanned skin with a manly face.

'Iori-san, I'm sorry for the long wait.'

The man had a friendly smile on his face.

'No, not at all. This is the eldest son of the Aoyama household, Aoyama Sousuke-sama.'

Iori's words seemed lively as she introduced Sousuke.

Her words, different from those she used towards townsmen like Yasohachi and Ukikumo, made Iori feel distant.

'This is Ukikumo-dono and Yasohachi-dono.'

Then, Iori introduced Yasohachi and Ukikumo.

'I hear you are a skilful exorcist that can exorcise any spirit – I am in your care,' Sousuke said politely.

Though the man gave a good impression, something smouldered within Yasohachi's heart. He himself didn't know what emotion it was.

'Let me say this first – I haven't agreed to take the case,' Ukikumo said firmly.

'What do you mean?'

Sousuke looked doubtful.

'I specialise in ghosts. I'll step out if a monster's involved or if it's the work of a person.'

'You're quite frank, aren't you? I've taken a liking to you.'

Sousuke laughed aloud, but Ukikumo's expression was impregnable.

'I hate samurai families. All of you just look down on people.'

'I like you even more. I don't like the current samurai family system either. It has to be more equal.'

'I don't plan on having a boring debate.'

'Ah, that is right. Then, let us go take a look immediately – '

Sousuke was their guide to the room with the wall scroll in question.

'About somebody coming out of this wall scroll – when did that start?' asked Ukikumo as they walked down the corridor.

'I don't know the details myself either,' replied Sousuke with a wry smile.

'I'm not asking the exact date. A general guess will be fine.'

'Hm... I think it was recent, but I also feel like there was a rumour of that kind since a while back.'

Sousuke's words were unclear, having lost their cheer from earlier.

'Then let me change the question. How long's that scroll been in this family?'

'I sincerely apologise, but I don't know for certain either. I feel like it's always been here...'

As they continued this vague exchange, they reached the room in question. Sousuke stopped. 'This is the room.'

Yasohachi's hands started to sweat when he thought that a cursed painting was just on the other side of the door.

Iori and Sousuke seemed nervous as well. Their lips were thin.

Ukikumo, alone, had the same blank expression as always.

'Then – '

Sousuke opened the sliding door.

The room was six tatami in size. Yasohachi scrunched up his face at the stench.

Dark red bloodstains were on the tatami, telling a gruesome tale.

Yasohachi just managed to fight the urge to vomit. Iori also seemed unwell, looking away from the sight.

Ukikumo silently looked about the room.

'How is it?' asked Sousuke, peering at Ukikumo's face.

'Step back a bit,' Ukikumo replied brusquely.

'He needs to concentrate to see ghosts,' said Yasohachi to Sousuke, who seemed confused.

Ukikumo probably wanted to take the red cloth off his eyes to look at the scene, but he couldn't do that with Sousuke here.

'Let us leave the situation to these two,' Iori urged Sousuke. Iori also knew about Ukikumo's red eye.

Sousuke looked like he didn't want to accept, but he left with Iori.

'How is it?' asked Yasohachi now that he and Ukikumo were alone.

'I can't see anything from here.'

It had started to grow dark, so they couldn't see the wall scroll in the back of the room.

Ukikumo stepped further in.

Yasohachi, though hesitant, followed him.

Ukikumo walked right up to the wall scroll and pulled the red cloth off his eyes.

His crimson eyes looked at the painting on the wall scroll.

Yasohachi stood next to Ukikumo and looked at the painting as well.

'Wha!?' Yasohachi yelped without thinking when faced with the indescribable strangeness of the painting.

A samurai stood in the centre of the wall scroll. His hakama was worn out – Yasohachi could almost smell its stench.

However, that wasn't why the painting was strange.

The man in the painting held a sword in his right hand. Four heads hung from his left.

The blood dripping from his sword looked incredibly real.

It was so ominous that Yasohachi felt that the samurai could really have come out of the painting.

The painting, filled with a frightening force, must have been painted by somebody with considerable talent.

– I wonder whose work this is.

There was a seal in the left corner of the painting.

'What a frightening painting,' said Yasohachi.

Ukikumo made a click with his tongue and murmured, 'So it really was Yuuzan...'

'What did you say?'

'The painting isn't what's frightening,' said Ukikumo. He looked away from the painting. Rather than fright, his words seemed filled with abhorrence.

'What do you mean?'

'You don't need to know.'

'But..'

The sound of footsteps rushing towards them interrupted Yasohachi.

An old samurai showed up.

He had a square face and just looked to be hard to please.

'You are the exorcists, aren't you?' the man accused.

'Yes,' replied Yasohachi.

The samurai sighed. 'Please leave. This is not a place for you.'

'But Sousuke-sama...'

'It has nothing to do with Sousuke-sama. As the Aoyama household steward, I cannot allow people like you from who knows where to come in and out. Especially after an incident like that. I don't even want to think about what sort of rumours might spring up.'

The old samurai said all that at once.

'You make it sound like we're criminals,' replied Ukikumo, since Yasohachi had been stunned into silence.

He had put the red cloth back on at some point.

For just a moment, the old samurai seemed to falter under the glare of the inked eyes, but he immediately continued, 'Perhaps you are.' He looked at them scornfully.

That was an extreme false accusation.

'This is why I hate samurai families – we're going, Hachi.'

Ukikumo was ready to leave, but Yasohachi called out to him.

'We don't know anything yet. At this rate...'

'Leave it. They don't want my help. Right?'

Ukikumo looked towards the old samurai, who nodded, looking satisfied.

'Seems you're quick on the uptake.'

'So he says.'

Ukikumo walked away briskly.

Yasohachi couldn't do anything even if he stayed here alone, so he ran after Ukikumo.

'Please wait, Ukikumo-san!'

Yasohachi kept calling out, but Ukikumo kept walking away.

'Please wait!'

Ukikumo finally stopped after going through the Aoyama estate's gates.

'You're so noisy.'

Ukikumo ran a hand through his hair in irritation.

'Let's go back.'

'Don't want to.'

'But nothing has been solved yet.'

'Like I care. It's not like I just left – I was chased out.'

Ukikumo snorted.

It was just as he said. It made sense for Ukikumo to be refused like that.

'But if this continues, there may be another victim.'

'Not maybe,' Ukikumo murmured.

'Eh?'

'I'm saying more people will die.'

Ukikumo put his staff on his shoulder and turned to look at the Aoyama estate's gates.

The way he spoke – perhaps Ukikumo knew something about this case.

'Then it is even more important that we do something.'

'Give it up.'

'Why? Because we were treated as criminals earlier?'

It was true that the old samurai's words had been irritating, but that was a different problem.

'They don't want my help. I don't care if they get cursed or die,' Ukikumo spat out.

'I've misjudged you.'

No matter what Ukikumo said, Yasohachi had believed him to be a man who wouldn't leave somebody in trouble alone –

'Did you trust me enough to misjudge me?'

'I...'

Yasohachi couldn't speak.

It wasn't because he couldn't find the words. It was because Ukikumo had covered Yasohachi's mouth with his hand.

Yasohachi tried to escape Ukikumo's hand, but he couldn't. Ukikumo was too strong.

'You're so annoying with all your whining.'

Ukikumo pulled the red cloth down and looked at Yasohachi with his crimson eyes.

His eyes were cold enough to freeze.

'...'

'Listen up. If you don't want to die as well, don't get involved with this case – got it?'

Ukikumo put his face close to Yasohachi's and whispered in his ear.

Yasohachi didn't respond. He just glared at Ukikumo.

For a while, they stared at each other silently, but finally, Ukikumo pushed Yasohachi away.

Yasohachi staggered backwards and fell onto his behind.

'Don't approach that painting on any account. Got it?' repeated Ukikumo. Then, he walked away. It was as if he had melted into the darkness.

Yasohachi watched him go, half in shock.

Earlier, Ukikumo had seemed to be afraid, rather than angry. What on earth was Ukikumo thinking –

'Yasohachi-san.'

Yasohachi came back to his senses when somebody called out to him.

When he turned around, he saw Iori looking at him, seeming concerned

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'That is quite a problem,' said Iori with a shake of her head once Yasohachi finished explaining the situation.

They were in the guestroom of the Hagiwara estate.

It was dark, and the moon was out.

'It really is,' replied Yasohachi with a sigh.

Even though Ukikumo made a living as an exorcist, he was slow to start work. However, that was only until he stuck his neck in, upon which things changed entirely. He wasn't the sort of man to abandon something midway. That was what Yasohachi had thought.

And yet –

'The person who chased you out was probably Matsuoka-dono, the steward.'

'He did mention that he was the steward.'

'Matsuoka-dono has never been on good terms with Sousuke-sama. It isn't just that he dislikes exorcists – so I think, anyway.'

Iori spoke in a clear voice with her back perfectly straight.

'Why are they on such bad terms?'

'Sousuke-sama is cheerful, just as he looks, and he has soft thoughts. It seems he attends a variety of assemblies.'

'I see.'

Yasohachi understood Iori's explanation.

However, for some reason, Yasohachi's heart sank the more Iori praised Sousuke.

'Meanwhile, Matsuoka-dono is serious and strict with rules. It is only natural that they do not get along.'

'He's a stalwart then.'

'Yes. He chased a retainer out of the household before when one of the family's vases was broken.'

Though Yasohachi did not know how precious that vase had been, he felt like that was doing a bit too much.

After Yasohachi said that, Iori nodded in agreement.

'However, with that situation, it makes it even harder to go into the Aoyama estate.'

If they couldn't go in, they couldn't solve the mystery.

'I will make efforts on my part. I think Sousuke-sama will do something.'

'Sousuke-sama...' replied Yasohachi flatly.

He felt like Iori was relying on Sousuke too much.

'More importantly, I am concerned about Ukikumo-dono. I don't think he is the sort of person to run away just because Matsuoka-dono said something...'

Iori looked up at Yasohachi.

The stiff expression naturally left Yasohachi's cheeks when faced with such a lovely expression, but he immediately noticed and hardened his expression.

'I was bothered by that too. And...'

'What is it?'

'Ukikumo-san said something odd.'

'Something odd?'

'Yes. "Don't approach that painting on any account." He told me that.'

If he had been angry with Matsuoka, he would have said not to approach the Aoyama household.

Now that Yasohachi thought about it, Ukikumo had decided to step out before Matsuoka had chased them out.

'That is strange.'

Iori looked suspicious.

'As well, he said one more thing – '

'What is it?'

“More people will die.”

Even as Yasohachi said it himself, a chill ran down his spine. Iori's expression hardened too.

That was how heavy the meaning of those words were.

'Then we really cannot leave the situation as it is...'

Yasohachi agreed with Iori's opinion. He wouldn't be able to sleep at night if he backed out now. However, even if he wanted to do something, there was a problem.

'However, even if I try to do anything, I cannot exorcise spirits – there is nothing I can do...'

Yasohachi, unlike Ukikumo, could not see the spirits of the dead. He was not a monk who could work miracles. In short, he could do nothing.

'It isn't as if you need to exorcise any spirits, Yasohachi-san,' Iori said firmly with a smile.

'Eh?'

'You just have to find out why Ukikumo-dono stepped out, don't you?'

'I see.'

Yasohachi clapped his hands together.

If he understood why Ukikumo had stepped away from the case, he could pull him in again.

Iori wasn't only beautiful – she was also intelligent, with a strong heart that was not easily shaken.

It was probably natural for somebody like Iori to become the wife of somebody from a high-ranking samurai family like Sousuke.

'Then where should we start?' asked Iori.

'That's right – I think Ukikumo-san noticed something about the painting, so I'd like to find out where the painting came from.'

'Do you have any ideas?'

'The name of the painter was on it.'

'Who is the painter?'

'Kanou Yuuzan – '

'Kanou Yuuzan – do you know him, Yasohachi-san?'

'I don't recognise the name Yuuzan, but a painter named Kanou – I have a guess.'

'It would be somebody related to the Kanou school, the largest of the painter school serving the shogunate.'

'Yes. Just as I expected, you already know,' said Yasohachi in admiration.

She was the daughter of a samurai family, so she was naturally well educated. He wouldn't have to explain further.

'No, not at all. More importantly, I just remembered when you mentioned the painting... I apologise.'

Iori bowed her head.

'What is it?'

'Even though you had said that you would paint a picture of me...'

Now wasn't the time to lightheartedly paint pictures. Yasohachi was just happy that she had remembered.

'No, please don't be concerned about that. Anyway, let us search for where that painting came from today.'

'Yes. Then I will visit your residence tomorrow morning, Yasohachi-san.'

Yasohachi wasn't sure he had heard Iori's casual words correctly. 'What did you just say?'

'That I would visit tomorrow morning,' Iori replied calmly.

'You plan on searching with me?'

'Yes. Is there a problem with that?' Iori cocked her head like she was confused.

'Iori-san, you don't have to search as well,' Yasohachi said fervently, half getting up.

However, Iori didn't budge. 'Why not?'

– I'm at a loss.

Yasohachi scratched his head. Then, he felt something strange. He couldn't describe it.

Iori and he exchanged glances and looked towards the well.

There was a man standing there.

It was a samurai, just as Shintarou had discussed in his story.

He was looking down and muttering something, but Yasohachi couldn't hear him clearly.

'Excuse me...' said Iori, going to approach the samurai, but Yasohachi held her back.

It would be a problem if she carelessly approached and was possessed. Iori seemed to sense Yasohachi's worries, as she did not go any closer.

Soon, the samurai's ghost disappeared silently.

'I wonder what he is trying to say?' said Yasohachi to himself.

'I don't know,' said Iori with a shake of her head.

Then, there was a clamour from the neighbouring Aoyama household. Ukikumo's words flashed through Yasohachi's head.

– More people will die.

Yasohachi had already started running. Iori was right behind him.

When they reached the Aoyama gates, Yasohachi stopped.

Though he had run all the way here, he couldn't just go in without permission. He was deciding what to do when the gate opened and a retainer rushed out.

'What happened?' asked Iori, grabbing the man's arm to stop him from running.

'My comrade Sadayuki collapsed, coughing out blood. I am going to call a doctor so –'

The man shook Iori's hand away and ran off.

Though Yasohachi did not understand the situation clearly, it appeared another person had fallen victim.

'I will ask for the details. Yasohachi-san, please leave for today.'

Iori said just that and quickly went through the gate.

For a while, Yasohachi was stunned, but just standing here was useless. He walked away with trudging steps.

– What on earth is happening?

Was that creepy painting bringing misfortune to the Aoyama household? Or – Yasohachi was thinking about various things when he suddenly stopped.

He had heard the chime of a bell.

He looked around. He saw a dark figure at a distance.

He wore a straw hat that covered his face^[1] with a pale mouse-coloured kimono that had a yellow sash over it.

It seemed he was a begging Komuso monk.

Probably nobody would pass by if he begged on a night like this. Since Yasohachi thought him pitiful, he put the change he had in the pot at the monk's feet.

Yasohachi was about to leave, but the monk suddenly called out to him.

'You have the shadow of death upon you – take care,' the monk said in a hoarse voice.

'What do you mean?' asked Yasohachi, but the monk silently turned around and left.

He left the pot of change behind in the dark –

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'Come on, Hachi! Wake up!'

Yasohachi woke up to a loud voice.

He rubbed his eyes sleepily and looked up to see Osayo with her hands at her hips, seeming angry.

'Sis, morning...'

'This isn't the time for that. A girl named Iori-san is here.'

Osayo's words woke Yasohachi right up.

He hurriedly jumped up and started to change.

'She's from a samurai family – is this OK?'

Osayo looked concerned.

'I know. IT's not like that. She's just helping Ukikumo-san out with something supernatural.'

'I see. That's good then.'

Osayo's expression softened.

Though Ukikumo said that rank didn't matter, that wasn't how things were in reality. It would be impossible for somebody from a lowly textile shop to marry the daughter of a samurai family.

'By the way, is he doing well?' asked Osayo.

'Er, yeah.'

He didn't dare to mention the quarrel they had had last night. Of course he didn't mention his promise to introduce Osayo either.

'I see... Why not bring him over next time? I want to thank him...' Osayo said a bit shyly.

Yasohachi was startled. Though it was faint, Osayo's cheeks looked a bit red.

– You're kidding me!

He wouldn't be able to stand it if Osayo ended up married to somebody like Ukikumo.

'Ukikumo-san is busy with things.'

Yasohachi finished dressing and ran out of the room.

After leaving the house, he found Iori waiting under the roof's eaves. Rather than her usual hakama, she was in a light pink kimono.

Yasohachi held his breath without thinking, stunned by her appearance.

'Yasohachi-san.'

Iori looked at him with a slight smile.

Yasohachi looked down when he realised in embarrassment that he had been staring. 'I apologise for the wait...'

'No, please don't worry about that. Is something the matter?' asked Iori, perhaps feeling that Yasohachi's behaviour was suspicious.

'No, er... I just thought it unusual that you weren't in hakama.'

'Since I did not know where we were going, I thought that being in hakama might be inappropriate...'

'I see.'

'It's a bit difficult to move about in this since I'm not used to wearing this sort of clothing.' Iori smiled bashfully.

Perhaps it would be appropriate for Yasohachi to say something like 'It looks good on you' or 'You look beautiful', but he couldn't say anything but 'Is that so?'

'More importantly, about what happened yesterday...' said Iori, her expression hardening.

Yasohachi was brought back to reality.

'How was it?'

'Unfortunately, somebody named Sadayuki has passed away.'

Iori bit her lip, looking pained.

Yasohachi felt the same way. If this had been solved earlier, the person named Sadayuki might not have died.

When Yasohachi thought about that, he felt angry at Ukikumo, who had pulled out without explaining his reason.

'Let us work our hardest so that there are no more victims.'

Yasohachi stiffened as well at Iori's forceful words.

'Yes. Let's do whatever we can to avoid any more victims.'

'Then, where shall we go?'

As Iori said that, she seemed a bit happy.

'There is a town painter named Machida Tenmei in Naito-Shinjuku. I was thinking we could go there first.'

Yasohachi hadn't looked this person up just for this case.

Yasohachi was looking for somebody to take him as an apprentice so that he could become a painter. One of the people he had found was Machida Tenmei.

The name Machida Tenmei was not very well known, but he mostly painted Buddhist pictures. His brush was rough but also delicate – his painting was unique.

When Yasohachi last went, he'd heard that the painter used to be in the Kanou school.

Though he was a bit of a difficult character, he would be the most suitable person to talk to about this case.

'Let's go then.'

'Yes, let's.'

Yasohachi and Iori started to walk.

As they walked, Iori suddenly said, 'She's very beautiful.'

'Yes. She's my older sister, Osayo.'

'Your older sister – '

'Yes. That said, we're not related by blood...'

In contrast to Yasohachi's self-deprecating smile, Iori appeared surprised.

Yasohachi couldn't hold information back now that he'd said this much. Yasohachi explained the strange circumstances of his birth to Iori as they walked along.

It was the incident that had caused him to meet Ukikumo –

Yasohachi had never been good at explaining, so the story took longer than it needed to. When he finished, they had already reached the long house where Machida Tenmei lived.

'Please excuse the intrusion – ' called out Yasohachi as he opened the sliding door.

'Oh, the boy from last time?'

A man looked up from his desk in the dark room.

It was Machida Tenmei. He was very slender and his eyes sunken in. It was as if he was a skeleton.

'Thank you for the other day... Er, this is the daughter of the Hagiwara household...'

'I don't care who she is. Well, there's not much room, but sit.'

Yasohachi and Iori went into the room at Tenmei's urging.

'This is wonderful,' said Iori in admiration, picking up one of the paintings strewn all over the floor.

It was a picture of the Buddha. He looked strong and awe-inspiring, but at the same time, there was a warm kindness to it.

'That work's rubbish. I don't need platitudes.'

'No, it really is...'

'Just stop,' interrupted Tenmei. Then, he said curtly, 'Are you going to keep stupidly saying that you want to be a painter?'

'Well, yes,' replied Yasohachi.

Tenmei snorted. 'I said this before, but give it up. The world of painting with its schools and whatnot is completely rotten. There's nothing good about it. If you're going to do it at all, Dutch-style painting is the way to go.'

Yasohachi had heard that before.

It seemed that Tenmei hated the different schools of the art world. He had probably felt that way from being in the Kanou school, which was the largest of them all.

'Er... I actually came for a different reason today,' Yasohachi said stiffly.

If this continued, they would be forced to listen at length to Tenmei's criticism of the different schools.

'A different reason?'

Tenmei's sunken eyes narrowed.

'Yes. We are searching for a certain painter.'

'Want to become some painter's apprentice?'

'No, there's another reason...'

Yasohachi didn't mind explaining, but to be honest, he felt it would be rather difficult.

'So who are you searching for?'

Fortunately, Tenmei didn't ask for details.

'Kanou Yuuzan – '

The moment Yasohachi said that name, Tenmei's eyes went wide and he grew pale.

From that reaction, it seemed that he knew him.

Iori seemed to think the same way. She leant forward slightly.

'Where'd you hear that name?' said Tenmei, with a frightening expression on his face that Yasohachi had never seen before.

'I saw a painting by him – '

'What will you do if you find him?'

'Actually, I heard that a ghost of a samurai came out of the painting and killed a servant.'

When Yasohachi said that, Tenmei let out a long sigh.

The room was filled with an unpleasant atmosphere.

'If that was really Kanou Yuuzan's painting, it's probably true – ' said Tenmei in a hoarse voice.

'What do you mean?'

'Exactly what I said. That's the sort of painter Kanou Yuuzan is. I won't say anything else, but don't be so stupid as to go looking for him.'

Tenmei's tone brooked no argument.

However, Yasohachi had found a clue. He couldn't back down.

'Why not? What sort of person is Kanou Yuuzan?' asked Yasohachi, leaning forward.

Tenmei pushed him back. 'You don't have to know. You don't need to know. Sorry, but could you leave?'

Tenmei turned away from Yasohachi. It was a complete refusal.

Nothing Yasohachi said would be of any use now. Yasohachi reluctantly left Tenmei's home.

'I wonder what sort of person Kanou Yuuzan is,' murmured Iori after stepping outside.

'I don't know.'

All Yasohachi could do was cock his head.

Ukikumo and Tenmei had both completely changed their attitudes upon hearing the name. It was as if they were afraid.

– What sort of painter is Kanou Yuuzan?

As Yasohachi walked and thought, somebody called out from his side. 'Hello – '

HE turned around to see a man standing there. Though he had a sword at his waist, his kimono was old and his topknot was a mess. He did not seem dignified.

He appeared to be a ronin from somewhere.

'What is it?' asked Yasohachi.

The man smiled, showing his yellowed teeth.

Yasohachi had a bad feeling.

'I hear you're looking for Kanou Yuuzan-sensei.'

'How do you know that?'

'I was eavesdropping earlier. I don't mind telling you where he is.'

Iori grabbed Yasohachi's sleeve.

She probably wanted to tell him that this man was suspicious. Yasohachi agreed. Though it was not good to judge people based on their appearances, he just couldn't trust the man in front of him.

'I appreciate the offer, but no thank you.'

Yasohachi made a move to leave, but the man grabbed his arm.

'I said I don't mind telling you, so shut up and follow me,' the man said. His breath smelled rotten.

Yasohachi did not know the man's goal, but there was definitely evil intent in his eyes.

'Please let go of that hand!'

Iori picked up a stick that had been nearby and held it up as a wooden sword.

'Do you think you can beat me in that clothing?'

The man looked at Iori scornfully.

Iori frowned slightly. Iori was currently wearing a kimono instead of her usual hakama. It would be hard for her to move freely. Her stance was narrow as a result.

'Yah!'

However, Iori still slashed forward, fluid like water as she hit the man's wrist.

The man curled up in pain, but the stick Iori had been holding split in two. Iori was looking for a replacement when the man stood up first.

'You bitch... You'll pay for that!'

The man's eyes were red with anger as he hit Iori.

Though Iori probably could have evaded the hit in a hakama, her kimono made her movements slower.

The man's fist hit Iori straight on and she fell to the floor, face-down. She wasn't moving –

'Iori-san!'

Yasohachi ran up to Iori and shook her.

It looked like she had just fainted. She was still breathing.

He was only allowed a moment of relief though. Yasohachi felt killing intent behind him.

Yasohachi had been distressed, but to have left his back so unguarded –

Regret only came when it was too late. Yasohachi felt a shock of pain in the back of his head, and then his consciousness slipped into a deep darkness –

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There was the chime of a bell.

Yasohachi slowly opened his eyes, as if the gentle tinkling had invited him to.

He was in a dim and damp place with a slight stench. It seemed Yasohachi was lying on a dirt floor.

The back of his head felt heavy.

He tried to touch his head, but he couldn't. His wrists were bound tightly together with rope.

He slowly sat up. It looked like he was in an old farmer's house. A man was sitting in front of the hearth. The man wore slightly dirty hakama.

The moment he saw the man's bearded face, his blurry memories came back to him at once.

The man in front of Yasohachi had called out to him and then attacked him.

– I need to escape!

Though Yasohachi tried to run, his hands were bound so he couldn't move as he wanted to. He fell to the ground.

'Don't move,' the man muttered. He picked up the sword at his side and slowly stood up.

The man let out a strange air.

Yasohachi had thought he was a ronin, but perhaps this man was Kanou Yuuzan.

'You...'

'I said not to move. I'll kill you if you move – '

The man took the sword out of its sheath and put its tip at Yasohachi's chin.

The cold sword made a tremor of terror run through Yasohachi.

However, he couldn't falter here. Yasohachi had to confirm something.

'What happened to Iori-san?' he said, glaring at the man.

'Iori?'

'Yes. The girl who was with me.'

'Ah, that girl – '

The man stopped there. His lips twisted into a dark smile.

Yasohachi's heart beat loudly.

'Hm, I wonder – want me to tell you?'

The man licked his lips. His shoulders shook as he laughed.

When Yasohachi saw that, the hair stood up on his skin. Even without the man saying anything, Yasohachi could guess what he had done to Iori.

Yasohachi lost himself to the anger welling up within him and charged at the man – but then something lit up the dark room.

Somebody was standing in the doorway. Because of the light behind the person, Yasohachi couldn't make up their face.

'Who are you!?'

The man readied his sword. It seemed he hadn't expected a guest either.

'My name isn't important. I am only a lowly medicine seller,' said the figure in the doorway.

Yasohachi recognised that voice.

'Medicine seller?'

'Yes. I am from Ishida Sanyaku. Would you like a salve?'

As the figure said that, they stepped into the room. Now, Yasohachi could see the person's face clearly.

'Hijikata-san!'

The person who had come in was Hijikata, a merchant of medicine.

He often came to Yasohachi's shop and had introduced him to Ukikumo.

He had his medicine box on his back as usual. For some reason, he also had a wooden sword.

'Yasohachi-san, you appear to be fine,' said Hijikata, his narrow eyes growing narrower.

'I don't need medicine! Get out of here already!' yelled the man angrily.

However, Hijikata did not flinch. He just smiled faintly.

'Yes, of course I will. Yasohachi-san, let us leave.'

Hijikata approached Yasohachi, but the man stood between them to stop him.

'Didn't you hear me? Get out of here! I'll cut you with my sword otherwise!'

The man pointed the tip of his sword at Hijikata.

– Please run away!

Yasohachi wanted to say that, but his voice wouldn't come out in his fear. It wasn't because he was afraid of the man with the sword.

It was because Hijikata's face had – changed.

The smile from earlier had disappeared. He was as expressionless as a Noh mask. His eyes were sharp, piercing.

'A lowly ronin is going to cut *me*?'

Hijikata had stopped using polite language[2]. It was as if he was a completely different person.

'You're just a medicine seller! Don't look down on me! What can you do with a wooden sword?'

'You're a dog that just keeps barking,' Hijikata said with contempt. He put down his medicine box and held up his wooden sword.

'Do you know who I am!?!'

'I don't. I don't care.'

'Then I'll teach your body.'

The man held up his sword and put his left foot forward.

Though Yasohachi was a novice regarding swordsmanship, he could tell that the man had to have considerable skill from his expert stance.

'Looks like you're not completely awful, even though you're a ronin,' Hijikata said quietly. He held his sword up in front of him, the tip pointed at the man's eyes. Then, he lowered the tip of the sword to his thigh.

Though at first glance he seemed defenceless, there were no gaps there.

'Ei!'

The man rushed forward.

Hijikata swiftly avoided the strike. However, the man's attack continued.

– Watch out!

The man went for Hijikata's throat before Yasohachi could even scream.

Hijikata turned his body and evaded the man's strike. He hit the man's arm with his wooden sword and continued, his sword going for the man's throat.

Though the strikes had been the same, even a novice like Yasohachi could tell that their skill level was completely different.

The man didn't even have time to let out a groan. He dropped the sword and fell forward. He stopped moving.

'It's a good thing I brought a wooden sword,' murmured Hijikata.

Yasohachi was about to walk up to Hijikata, but Hijikata stopped him. Even though the man was on the floor, the air about Hijikata had not relaxed.

'Why not come out from there instead of just watching?' said Hijikata, sending a sharp glance towards the back of the room.

– Is somebody behind that sliding door?

Yasohachi held his breath as he watched.

After a long silence, there was the chime of a bell.

'Gone then – '

As if that chime had been a sign, Hijikata breathed out and then walked up to Yasohachi.

He was smiling gently, completely different from his expression before.

'Everything is fine now,' Hijikata said as he started to untie the ropes binding Yasohachi's body. Even his way of speaking had changed.

'Hijikata-san – who on earth are you?'

'I am just a medicine seller.'

'Just a medicine seller wouldn't be able to do something like that to a ronin.'

Yasohachi looked at the man lying face down on the floor.

'He was just too weak,' Hijikata said nonchalantly, but Yasohachi couldn't accept that.

'And why are you here?'

'I was asked see.'

'What were you asked?'

'To watch over you.'

'Who on earth asked you to do that?'

'You'll understand if you come with me,' replied Hijikata with a smile.

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9

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Hijikata brought Yasohachi to Marukuma, a bar that he knew well.

Though he had asked Hijikata many questions before reaching here, Hijikata had not given him any proper answers.

'This is where I take my leave. That man awaits you on the second floor,' said Hijikata in front of the entrance. Then, he walked away briskly.

Yasohachi realised that he hadn't thanked Hijikata yet, but Hijikata had already disappeared.

With a sigh, Yasohachi went under the curtain at the entrance to Marukuma.

'Hachi! It's been a while.'

The owner, Kumakichi, called out to him with a wave.

Yasohachi had known Kumakichi for a long time. The man was as large and hairy as his name suggested, but he was kind and considerate despite his appearance.

'Hello, Kuma-san.'

'Seems like you were in some trouble.'

Kumakichi patted him on the shoulder.

'Er...'

'Guy's waiting on the second floor,' Kumakichi said, using his chin to point.

Though there were a number of things Yasohachi wanted to ask, Kumakichi left to attend to another customer.

Yasohachi was still confused as he went up the stairs and opened the sliding door.

'Yasohachi-san!'

Somebody leapt up and called out to him. It was Iori.

Though her kimono was slightly sullied, it seemed she had no heavy injuries.

'Iori-san, you look well.'

'Yes. I fainted, and when I woke up, you were gone... I am very glad that you are safe.'

It seemed she had truly been worried. Iori gripped Yasohachi's hand tightly.

Yasohachi had thought that the man had done something to her, but it seemed that was not the case.

'Are you done with the touching reunion?'

Somebody spoke in a drawl from the back of the room.

When Yasohachi stepped in, he saw Ukikumo drinking from a sake cup as he sat with his back against the wall.

'Ukikumo-san – what on earth is this?'

'I'll explain, so sit down.'

Yasohachi sat in front of Ukikumo as instructed. Iori sat in the same manner.

'Honestly. I told you not to get involved and you made some pointless plan anyway – this is why you get into situations like that,' grumbled Ukikumo, downing his cup of sake.

'But... I couldn't just leave things like that.'

'If you lose your life, there's no point, is there?'

'I'm alive right now.'

'Idiot! If I hadn't told that Hijikata to keep watch over you, you might have died!'

Ukikumo slammed the tatami with his fist.

It was the first time Yasohachi had seen Ukikumo so angry. Perhaps it was strange, but Yasohachi was happy.

That anger meant that Ukikumo had been worried about Yasohachi.

'I apologise – but I couldn't just accept things without an explanation,' said Yasohachi, leaning forward as he did so.

Ukikumo crossed his arms and looked up at the ceiling. It seemed he wasn't sure whether to talk.

'I feel the same way as Yasohachi-san.'

Iori also looked at Ukikumo with resolve in her eyes.

Ukikumo looked at Yasohachi and then Iori. Then, he sighed and ran a hand through his hair.

'Honestly, you are such troublesome brats. No helping it – I'll talk. Do what I say afterwards. Can you promise me that?'

Yasohachi and Iori nodded. Ukikumo downed another cup of sake before speaking.

'First, the ronin that kidnapped Hachi... I don't know anything about him. Just some underling that got hired.'

'Who hired him?'

'Kanou Yuuzan,' said Ukikumo, his voice cold.

'Why?'

'Kanou Yuuzan has something to do with this incident. He thought that you'd get in the way of his work if you kept snooping about.'

'So is Kanou Yuuzan the person behind this chain of incidents?'

'That's half right, but it's half wrong.'

'Eh?'

'What incident are you talking about anyway?'

It was a strange question for Ukikumo to ask after all that had happened.

'A ghost came out of a painting and killed a servant.'

'The host that my brother saw at the well,' supplemented Iori.

Ukikumo snorted.

'What is so funny?' asked Yasohachi.

Ukikumo looked bitter.

'If only your brother hadn't seen a ghost, I wouldn't have had to be involved in this incident with Kanou Yuuzan.'

Ukikumo's gaze made Iori look troubled.

'It isn't Iori-san's fault,' objected Yasohachi, but Ukikumo just responded with a click of his tongue.

'I know that. It's just that I'd planned on throwing away my past, but I couldn't escape from it.'

'Your past?'

'Yeah. I don't want to remember it...'

Ukikumo had a complex expression on his face, a mixture of anger, hatred and sadness.

What kind of past did Ukikumo have – and how was it related to Kanou Yuuzan –

'What on earth happened?' asked Yasohachi.

Ukikumo slowly stood up.

'That's enough with the boring talk. I'm going to exorcise that spirit –'

As he stood there, he looked splendid, as if something had come unbound.

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10

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In the Aoyama household guestroom, Yasohachi knelt with his back completely straight –

Sousuke sat opposite him. Iori was also there.

Ukikumo had his staff under his left arm and was drinking from the sake cup in his right hand.

'Can you really exorcise the spirit?' Sousuke asked Ukikumo.

There was a hint of doubt in that voice. No matter the reason, Ukikumo had left last time, so it made sense for Sousuke to feel that way.

Yasohachi himself was a bit doubtful.

He still didn't know who the painter named Kanou Yuuzan was. That wasn't all – he didn't feel like there was any real lead.

Find the reason the spirit is wandering and solve it – that was Ukikumo's method of exorcism. It didn't seem like much preparation had been done.

'Of course,' said Ukikumo confidently, ignoring Yasohachi's concerns.

'I can't really believe that. In the first place...'

'Please believe in Ukikumo-dono for now. There is no other means to solve these strange incidents,' Iori said firmly.

Sousuke could do nothing but be silent. Ukikumo gave Iori a glance before continuing.

'You brought the scroll, right?'

'Yes,' responded Sousuke, unrolling Kanou Yuuzan's painting.

Looking at it again like this, it really was unsettling.

'First, the question is who is painted in this painting.'

Ukikumo tapped the painting with his staff.

If the painting was cursed, that was quite rough handling of it.

'Who is it?'

Sousuke cocked his head. It seemed like he didn't know.

'The samurai in this painting used to be in the Aoyama household,' declared Ukikumo.

'How do you know that?' interrupted Yasohachi, unable to keep silent.

Ukikumo glared at him as if to tell him to shut up, but Yasohachi couldn't help his interest.

'Kanou Yuuzan, the painter, is a painter of the Kanou school as well as a shaman. He takes money from people with grudges and does curses for them – he's a good-for-nothing.'

Ukikumo's tone was angry.

So that was the sort of man Kanou Yuuzan was – Yasohachi finally understood. AHe understood why Ukikumo and Tenmei had so furiously tried to avoid involving themselves with him.

This case wasn't just a supernatural phenomenon. A shaman was involved. It was a warning.

'So somebody put a curse on the Aoyama household because of a grudge?' asked Sousuke.

'Yes,' replied Ukikumo.

'Then it might be someone from outside the family.'

'No, it's somebody from within. Look at that samurai's haori. The mujisen crest[3] is on it, right?'

Everyone looked at the painting. There was a mujisen crest, just as Ukikumo had said.

'That is indeed our family crest – '

Sousuke looked up.

'Is there any man who holds a grudge within the Aoyama household?'

'Even if you ask me that...'

'Then let's change the question. Did any man in the Aoyama household die or go missing?'

Sousuke's eyes flew open at Ukikumo's question.

It seemed he had an idea.

'About a year ago, there was a retainer who broke a family vase. His name was Tacuchi Katsujirou. Matsuoka, the steward, reprimanded him harshly and he disappeared from the household that night...'

The sliding door opened, interrupting Sousuke's words.

The person standing there was the very topic of their conversation, Matsuoka himself.

'What does the likes of an exorcist have to do with the Aoyama household?' said Matsuoka accusingly. However, Ukikumo did not move.

'Shut up, you shameless man!'

'What!?'

'You were listening from outside, right? You rushed in because you heard your name am I wrong?'

It seemed Ukikumo was right on the mark. Matsuoka froze, his mouth gaping.

'You knew that the man in this painting was Taguchi, right?'

Ukikumo grabbed the painting and stood up, thrusting the painting in front of Matsuoka's eyes.

Matsuoka looked away from the painting and sat down. Though he didn't respond, that was response enough.

'Then the person named Taguchi had a grudge and requested Kanou Yuuzan's services to curse this household?' asked Yasohachi.

Ukikumo shook his head. 'No. The man named Taguchi is dead – right?'

Ukikumo looked at Iori.

Why was he looking at Iori? Yasohachi was confused, but he looked at Iori as well.

'That always bothered me. My brother said the same thing. That the ghost that appeared by the well seemed familiar – '

Iori's voice was hoarse.

'That was Taguchi-san?' asked Yasohachi.

Iori nodded. 'I didn't speak to him much, so I only knew his face and had completely forgotten. However, hearing this now, I'm certain that that was Taguchi-dono.'

Iori was probably not lying.

If he had appeared as a ghost –

'That means Taguchi-san is already dead,' said Yasohachi.

Ukikumo smiled. 'Exactly. The body was probably thrown into the well.'

Ukikumo stood in the open doorway and pointed at the well in the back of the garden. Just like at the Hagiwara household, the well was covered and didn't appear to be in use.

Here, Yasohachi recalled why the Hagiwara household well had fallen out of use. It had a strange smell and the water was dirty.

Wells of neighbouring households would be connected underground. The stench had probably been from Taguchi's body.

'That's too much,' Sousuke said with a wry smile.

'I agree completely! What proof do you have for your words!? That's just rude!'

Matsuoka's voice was also rough.

'Shut up!'

Ukikumo hit the tatami with his staff.

The room fell silent under that force.

'You can find out if it's a lie or the truth easily by searching the bottom of that well.'

When Ukikumo said that, Matsuoka let out an 'Urgh'. His forehead was drenched in sweat.

'Now – the question is who killed Taguchi...'

Ukikumo shut the sliding door and stood in the centre of the room, looking about it.

Under the glare of the eyes painted on the red cloth, everyone seemed to shrink.

'It was me...'

Somebody within the room spoke.

At first, it was so quiet that Yasohachi didn't know who it was.

Finally, Matsuoka stood and said with resolve, 'I did it.'

He had been so angry at Taguchi for breaking the vase that he had killed him – it didn't sound impossible, but it didn't make sense to Yasohachi somehow.

Ukikumo smiled slightly, as if he had sensed what Yasohachi was feeling.

'Loyalty is a good thing, but that's what drew out this incident.'

'What?'

Matsuoka's eyes flashed open at Ukikumo's words.

'Won't somebody say who killed Taguchi – ' murmured Ukikumo to no one in particular.

'You!'

With that yell, the sliding door opened.

A woman stood there. It was Okiku, the servant.

She was so agitated that her shoulders were heaving as she breathed and her eyes were bloodshot. She had a small knife in her hand.

'Wha!'

Iori quickly stood up and tried to go hold Okiku back, but Ukikumo stopped her.

'Who killed Taguchi?' Ukikumo asked Okiku.

'Sousuke! You did it! Katsujirou-sama! Give Katsujirou-sama back!' screamed Okiku as she glared at Sousuke.

'W-what are you saying? I don't know what you're talking about. Matsuoka did it. He said it just earlier.'

Sousuke sounded afraid, but he got up and held the sword by his side, unsheathing it to keep Okiku in check.

The small guestroom fell silent.

Yasohachi didn't understand what was happening. He was bewildered.

Ukikumo skilfully used his staff in the small room to knock the sword out of Sousuke's hand.

'W-what are you doing!?'

Matsuoka hurriedly tried to get up, but Ukikumo jabbed him in the gut.

Matsuoka bent over and stopped moving.

'Now, he's unarmed. Okiku said that, but could you tell us the truth?

Ukikumo put his staff on his shoulder and turned towards Sousuke.

Okiku also approached Sousuke. She still had the knife in her hand.

Sousuke was still a samurai. Even if he was unarmed, he shouldn't be afraid of a girl with a knife, but the atmosphere Ukikumo had brought about seemed to have taken away his ability to resist.

'That's not true. There was no helping it. Taguchi had tried to betray... I tried to convince him. But he still...'

Sousuke backed away, pressing himself against the wall.

Though Yasohachi didn't know the details, it seemed Sousuke had killed Taguchi.

After hearing Sousuke's confession, Ukikumo nodded, seeming satisfied, and then stood in front of Okiku.

'That's the end of it. You've been caught by a curse.'

'Move away! Katsujirou's spirit won't ascend unless I kill that man!' yelled Okiku over Ukikumo. Then, she went for Sousuke. However, Ukikumo didn't allow her.

He grabbed Okiku's arm and forced her out into the garden.

Okiku fell to the ground. Perhaps she had fainted, as she was not moving.

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11

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'What on earth is happening?' Yasohachi asked, half in shock.

'Can't you tell?' said Ukikumo as he left the room and stepped down into the garden. Yasohachi followed him.

'I'm asking because I can't.'

'Okiku was the one who killed the servant and poisoned the retainer,' said Ukikumo matter-of-factly. However, Yasohachi didn't understand the logic.

'Why would you think that? Didn't a ghost come out of the painting to kill the servant?' Yasohachi asked pleadingly.

'Idiot. Don't make me keep saying this. Ghosts don't have a corporeal form – they can't kill people.'

Ukikumo had said this often before.

Since Ukikumo could actually see ghosts, it was probably true. But –

'Even if a ghost didn't kill them, it doesn't have to be Okiku-san. It might have been someone else. That...'

Though Yasohachi avoided saying it aloud, he glanced at Sousuke and Matsuoka, who were still in the room, frightened.

'That servant had her throat slit, right?'

'You're saying that the sword of a samurai would have left a different injury.'

Iori said the words that Ukikumo had held back.

'Ah,' said Yasohachi, understanding now.

A sword would have left a larger cut. Even if the samurai had used a stab, it would have gone through the throat.

Though Yasohachi had not seen it himself, the injury of the servant who had been killed first had not been that deep.

'And how about the retainer who died coughing up blood?'

'It would be easy to mix poison in with the food. A servant would have had any number of chances to do so.'

Ukikumo's words sounded logical, but Yasohachi hadn't accepted everything yet.

'There are other servants.'

'Remember the first time we came here.'

Yasohachi understood now.

'Okiku-san was the one who said a ghost came out of the painting – '

'But other retainers mentioned seeing a ghost too,' objected Iori.

'Did they really see one?' said Ukikumo with a hand on his chin.

'Eh?'

'Okiku said she saw one. Maybe that just made them think they saw one too/'

Iori bit her lower lip. It seemed she sensed what Ukikumo was trying to say.

Come to think of it, Okiku was the only one who had declared that she'd seen a ghost come out of the scroll.

'But why? Why would Okiku-san...'

Yasohachi looked at Okiku, who was lying on the ground in the garden.

'Revenge,' replied Ukikumo, his voice a bit sad.

'Revenge?'

'Yes. Okiku and the dead Taguchi had probably been lovers. After Sousuke killed Taguchi, Okiku was turned into a demon of revenge.'

If it was as Ukikumo said, there was something that didn't make sense.

'But the servant and retainer have nothing to do with it.'

'They do. Her aim was Sousuke, but the dead servant and retainer knew about Taguchi's murder – or they had something to do with it.'

'But killing them is still...'

'I'm saying that this is Kanou Yuuzan's curse,' said Ukikumo with a bitter expression on his face.

'Do curses really exist?' said Iori doubtfully.

'They do.'

'But something like that...'

'Curses aren't just chants that bring about strange phenomena.' Ukikumo looked at Iori with the eyes painted on the red cloth. 'Kanou Yuuzan burrows into people's hearts, invites them into the darkness with his skilful words and changes them into demons. That in itself is a curse –'

Ukikumo hit the ground with his staff.

As if that were a sign, Okiku staggered up.

Her face was pale. Her lips were twisted into a smile and her eyes were bloodshot. She looked just like a demon.

'Kanou Yuuzan put a curse on Okiku. He claimed that Taguchi's spirit would wander hell for all eternity unless she took revenge.'

Ukikumo pulled the cloth off his eyes.

He revealed his red eyes under the moonlight. Since his back was turned towards the people in the room, they probably couldn't see them.

'But that wouldn't really...' said Yasohachi in a strangled voice.

He understood what Ukikumo was trying to say, but was it really possible to manipulate people's hearts like that?

'You'd think that if you were thinking normally, but Okiku's lover had been killed. Furthermore – why do you think it took her a year to start her revenge?'

'Could it be...'

'Yes. Kanou Yuuzan took a year to slowly turn Okiku's heart into a demon. If that isn't a curse...'

Yasohachi felt a chill run down his spine.

He finally realised the terrifying nature of the curses by the person named Kanou Yuuzan. That was why Ukikumo had clearly not wanted to be involved.

'Can't anything be done?'

'I came here to do something,' said Ukikumo with a slight smile.

– Ah, of course.

Yasohachi felt relieved from the bottom of his heart. Ukikumo would be able to undo the curse on Okiku. Furthermore, Ukikumo wasn't the sort of man who could ignore somebody in trouble.

Ukikumo took a deep breath and walked up to Okiku.

Okiku stumbled backwards, perhaps afraid of those red eyes.

'Can you see my eyes?' asked Ukikumo.

Okiku let out a small moan.

'My eyes can see ghosts. Taguchi is wandering this world even now. Why do you think he is?'

'Because of hate. He hates them.'

Okiku's eyes, full of loathing, turned towards Sousuke and the others in the room.

'That isn't it. Taguchi laments how you have turned into a demon.'

'Impossible. Katsujirou-sama wanders this world because of his hatred.'

Okiku shook her head furiously.

'Taguchi's ghost appeared at the neighbouring Hagiwara household. Why do you think it did that?'

'...'

'If he hated the people of the Aoyama household, he should have been standing by their beds.'

Okiku made no reply to Ukikumo's words. She was just taking loud breaths.

Ukikumo walked up closer to her. Okiku backed away. However, she hit the wall and could not back away any further.

'It hurts. Help – Taguchi keeps repeating that. At first, I thought he wanted to be released, but that was not the case.'

'What...'

Okiku's eyes flew open.

'Taguchi is suffering because it hurts him to see you as a demon. He is pleading because he wants somebody to help you, now that you have gone somewhere that you cannot return from.'

'No! No! No!'

Okiku let out a scream and waved her knife about madly.

The tip scratched Ukikumo's arm.

Yasohachi hurriedly tried to run up to him, but Ukikumo stopped him.

'You can see him too, right? Taguchi,' Ukikumo murmured, his voice kind.

Yasohachi couldn't see anything, but it seemed to be different for Okiku. Her shocked eyes were wide open and she wasn't moving.

The knife slipped out of Okiku's hand –

'Aaahh!'

With a mix between a howl and a shout of joy, Okiku fell to her knees.

In that moment, Yasohachi felt like he could see Taguchi's ghost standing in front of Okiku.

Maybe it was just an illusion, but –

'Is it over?' Yasohachi asked.

Ukikumo shook his head.

'Nothing is over.'

'Eh?'

'The curse on Okiku has been undone. Do you understand the meaning of that?'

Ukikumo's eyes were unusually frightening.

'Coming back to your senses means to know the weight of your crimes. She has killed two people. She will not be able to escape the death penalty.'

The one who spoke in a terribly dark voice was Iori.

'But that's just... so sad...' said Yasohachi in a hoarse voice.

If this was going to happen, wouldn't it have been better if they hadn't undone the curse on Okiku – Yasohachi almost thought that.

'It was already too late once the first servant died – ' murmured Ukikumo.

Maybe that was the reason Ukikumo had wanted to step away from the case.

Even though Sousuke was the one who had caused everything, Okiku would have to suffer. Yasohachi didn't know which was right.

Yasohachi looked at Sousuke, who was frozen in the room.

Ukikumo slowly looked towards Sousuke as well.

Under the glare of those red eyes, Sousuke let out an 'Eek!'.

A question came to Yasohachi now.

'Why did Sousuke-san kill Taguchi-san?'

As if to respond to Yasohachi's question, there was the chime of a bell.

– Where is that coming from?

Yasohachi looked around and the bell chimed again.

Ting –

The sound of the bell seemed to be growing closer.

'If you're here, come out already, Yuuzan – '

Ukikumo looked towards the well.

Then – a man appeared from within the darkness.

He wore a straw hat that covered his face and a yellow sash over his kimono. He held a bell. Yasohachi had seen him before – it was the monk who had told Yasohachi that he had the shadow of death over him.

'Kanou Yuuzan – ' said Ukikumo in a bitter voice.

Yasohachi held his breath without thinking as he looked at Kanou Yuuzan. He looked as sinister and frightening as the painting on the wall scroll.

Still he had a strange power that drew people in.

'It has been a while. So you call yourself Ukikumo now – '

In complete contrast to Yuuzan's dark look, his voice was refreshing. It was as beautiful as the chime of his bell.

'I can call myself whatever I want.'

'You seem rather angry. I had thought that you might be a bit happy at reuniting with me...'

'Shut up!' yelled Ukikumo.

Though the likes of Yasohachi trembled under that force, Yuuzan showed a slight smile.

'Are you still angry about that? It's your fault that person died – ' said Yuuzan quietly. He slowly took off his straw hat.

The face that appeared was different from the one Yasohachi had imaged.

He was probably in his late twenties. With his white skin and almond eyes, he could have been mistaken for a woman.

Something about him reminded Yasohachi of Ukikumo.

'You're the same as always. Enjoying yourself as you play with people's hearts,' spat out Ukikumo.

Though Yasohachi did not know how these two were connected, there seemed to be a deep mutual enmity.

'Even if you change your name, you will not change on the inside. No matter how much time passes, you cling onto sentiment. How many people do you think have suffered as a result?' Yuuzan said in an indifferent tone.

'Shut up. I have my own way of doing things.'

'And so you arrived at exorcism – what a bizarre man you are.'

'You're doing some bizarre curses yourself. If you want to assassinate people, just cut them down with a sword.'

'There are circumstances that forbid me from doing so,' replied Yuuzan, his lips twitching up into a smile.

The smile was cold enough to make Yasohachi shudder.

'What sort of circumstances are those?'

The one who had asked was lori.

Yuuzan glanced lori's way, but his glance immediately returned to Ukikumo.

'Well, I have come all this way, so I will tell you – Sousuke-san has recently been involved with extreme patriots who wish to overthrow the shogunate. They were planning to assassinate a certain person,' said Yuuzan.

'A steward of the shogunate?'

'Close, but not quite – that is my only answer.'

Yuuzan seemed incredibly pleased as he responded to Ukikumo's question.

'Why would that mean a curse on Okiku-san?'

Yasohachi tried to approach, but Ukikumo stopped him.

'This is Yuuzan's way.'

'Eh?'

'He used Okiku to bury Sousuke.'

'Used...'

'I don't know who Sousuke was trying to assassinate, but Taguchi probably found out. That was why Sousuke killed him.'

'What about the vase?'

'Matsuoka made that up. Matsuoka probably knew that Sousuke had killed Taguchi. It would be a problem if a retainer suddenly disappeared. His loyalty made him make up the story about the vase.'

'What!?!'

'The servant that was killed first and the poisoned retainer cooperated with Matsuoka. Yuuzan's goal was always to bury Sousuke, and in a way that wouldn't let anyone find out that the shogunate was involved – '

'So he used Okiku-san...'

Even as Yasohachi spoke, he wanted to vomit.

He could feel with his skin the terrible nature of the man named Kanou Yuuzan. To Yuuzan, Okiku had only been a tool to achieve his goal.

Though he was smiling faintly, behind it was a darkness that swallowed everything.

'Several points in your guesswork are incorrect, but well, that is the gist of it. In any case, the plan has been torn asunder because of you.'

Yuuzan spread his hands out in a playful manner.

For some reason, he had a carefree smile on his face.

'You... You're hiding something, aren't you?' asked Ukikumo.

Yuuzan nodded confidently.

'Yes. I laid another curse, in case something like this happened – '

After saying that, Yuuzan shook the bell in his left hand furiously. The noisy chimes of the bell reverberated.

'Matsuoka-san, at this rate, the name of the Aoyama household will be damaged. Only you, the steward of the family, can stop this. Now, do what you must,' Yuuzan said quickly, still ringing the bell.

'You bastard!'

Ukikumo seemed to have noticed something, as he knocked the bell out of Yuuzan's hand with his staff.

The bell stopped ringing, and everything was silent.

'You were a bit too late.'

As Yuuzan smiled, there was a scream.

Yasohachi turned and saw Matsuoka stabbing Sousuke's chest with his sword.

'What have you done!?'

Iori rushed over and tried to pull Matsuoka away.

However, her strength was not enough and she was pushed away.

'I will take responsibility with my life.'

Matsuoka pulled the sword out of Sousuke and this time stuck it in his own stomach.

Yasohachi and Ukikumo ran to Sousuke and Matsuoka, but it was too late. The two had stopped breathing.

'I was careless. You cursed Matsuoka too – ' said Ukikumo in a bitter voice as he turned around.

Yasohachi turned around as well, but Yuuzan was already gone. All that was left was a painting, covered in blood –

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epilogue

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The next day, Yasohachi was in the Hagiwara household guestroom –

He was here to explain what had happened at the Aoyama household to Iori's brother, Shintarou.

Yasohachi had been sure that Ukikumo would explain, but Ukikumo was just leaning against the wall and drinking sake. He made no move to speak.

That said, Yasohachi was not a good speaker. Parts of his explanation were vague, but Iori helped then.

'I see... Sousuke-dono did...'

Shintarou looked pained as he sighed.

'Brother, did you know anything?' asked Iori.

Shintaro looked troubled, but he said, 'I didn't think it was related to this case, but I had heard rumours that Sousuke-dono was involved with people who wanted to overthrow the shogunate.'

'I see...'

Iori cast down her eyes.

'What will happen to Okiku-san?' asked Yasohachi.

Shintarou and Iori both looked pained.

'Okiku killed two people. She'll probably get the death penalty.'

Ukikumo put his chin in his hand.

'That's...'

Though Yasohachi opened his mouth to speak, there was nothing he could do no matter how he protested.

'Ukikumo-dono – would you allow me to ask one more thing?' said Shintaro, turning to face Ukikumo formally.

'What?' replied Ukikumo, still looking down.

'The person named Kanou Yuuzan received a request to bury Sousuke-dono, and that is why this incident occurred – but who on earth made that request of him?'

'You know even without asking, don't you?'

Ukikumo's words made Shintarou's eyes narrow.

Though the two seemed to know, Yasohachi didn't.

'Who is it?' Yasohachi asked.

Ukikumo smiled bitterly.

'The Aoyama household is a powerful family employed by the shogunate. The situation would be bad for many people if it was found out that somebody from this family – even a branch one – wanted to overthrow the government. There was even a plan to kill a steward.'

Was it somebody from the main family who made the request? If that was the case –

'Don't say any more, or we won't be able to write it off as gossip,' Ukikumo said firmly, as if he had read Yasohachi's thoughts.

Then, Ukikumo said, 'That's all then – ' He stood up and tried to leave the room.

'Please wait. I have not given you your compensation – '

'Don't need it,' Ukikumo said steadfastly.

'But...'

'Instead, get Taguchi's corpse out of that well and give it a proper funeral,' said Ukikumo, his back turned towards them.

'Understood,' said Shintarou with a smile. Then, Ukikumo left.

No matter what Ukikumo said, he was a man with a kind heart.

'Er, if you would like, when the funeral is held, please take this painting as well – '

After saying that, Yasohachi gave a painting to Shintarou.

He had painted it last night. It was a painting of Taguchi and Okiku by the well. He had wanted them to be happy, even if it was only in a painting.

'Oh! I had heard from Iori, but this painting is more beautiful than I imagined – '

Shintarou's smile filled his face.

Being praised like that made Yasohachi feel embarrassed. 'Somebody like me is just...' he said humbly.

Iori smiled slightly. 'If Kanou Yuuzan's paintings are ones of curses, than your paintings, Yasohachi-dono, are ones of condolence,' said Shintarou with a nod.

Putting aside whether his paintings could be of any condolence, Yasohachi felt like he knew what would be his goal as a painter as he continued to paint in the future.

Yasohachi bowed towards Shintarou and Iori and followed Ukikumo out.

'Please wait – '

Yasohachi finally caught up to Ukikumo at the Hagiwara household gate.

'What? Aren't you going to paint that lass's picture?' Ukikumo said brusquely as he continued to walk.

– Ah!

Yasohachi's original goal had been to paint Iori's picture, but he had completely forgotten.

'There's still next time.'

'If you say things like that, you'll never get a chance to paint her.'

Ukikumo's words made sense, but if Yasohachi painted Iori, he would lose his excuse to meet her.

'More importantly, there's one thing I still don't understand.'

'What?'

Ukikumo stopped.

'That painting – who brought it into the Aoyama household?'

'Okiku, probably. She switched it with a painting that was there before. Well, Kanou Yuuzan was probably the one who got her to.'

'Why?'

'That painting was a sign of the curse. It signified what was going to happen. That's his way.'

Yasohachi thought about the painting on the wall scroll again.

The samurai standing by the well and the four heads hanging from his hand – it really was a painting of the incident.

The goal of putting that painting up may have been to unconsciously breed terror –

'How frightening – '

'People's hearts really are,' spat out Ukikumo. He started to walk again. However, Yasohachi still had questions.

'Where did Kanou Yuuzan go? And do you know Kanou Yuuzan from before?' Yasohachi said quickly as he ran after Ukikumo.

With a sigh, Ukikumo stopped again.

'I don't know where that guy went. Just...'

'What is it?'

'I had planned on abandoning my connection to him, but it seems there are some connections that cannot be cut – '

'What on earth does...'

Yasohachi wanted to ask what Ukikumo meant, but he had started walking again.

Yasohachi was about to run after him once more when he heard the refreshing chime of a bell.

He looked away frantically and thought, for just a moment, that he could see a monk in the distance.

– Is that?

Yasohachi wanted to say something, but then the figure disappeared.

Perhaps it had just been an illusion.

'Ah! Ukikumo-san! Please wait!'

Yasohachi came back to his senses and ran after Ukikumo –

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At this time, Yasohachi had no way to know that the next incident had already begun –

THE END

English translation by Laute, Laute! <http://laute.tumblr.com/>